REIMAGINING U.S. STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments



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Preface

U.S. policy in the Middle East across successive administrations on balance has not produced positive results for American interests or for the region. Despite aspirations across the political spectrum to pivot away from the Middle East after decades of costly interventions, challenges emanating from a region mired in instability will continue to affect U.S. interests. The question, however, is whether maintaining long-standing U.S. policies—which are heavily reliant on threat-based paradigms and military instruments of power—will produce better outcomes in the future. Or is it time to rethink some of the fundamental premises underlying U.S. policymaking in this region?

This report assesses the advantages and trade-offs of an alternative regional strategy in which strategic goals link to a broader understanding of stability that prioritizes reduced conflict, better governance, and greater growth and development. We consider how a U.S. strategy in the Middle East might look if the approach shifted from an emphasis on what we call *threatism*—focusing on the threat of the day, and particularly the Iranian threat—to a positive vision of a region supported by increased diplomatic and economic investments, one in which the sources of extremism and interstate competition are reduced to manageable levels. Reimagining U.S. strategy in the Middle East with a positive, but not idealized, vision of outcomes (rather than focusing on only the threats we are trying to contain) could lead to a new set of policy options for future decisionmakers to consider.

This research analyzes how key instruments of U.S. policy—political, security, economic, diplomatic, and informational—would need to adjust to more effectively addresses current regional challenges in ways that are mindful of limited resources at home. Given pandemics, climate change, and disruption in oil markets—combined with the region's multiple conflicts and governance failures—U.S. strategy can no longer afford to focus on the state and leadership level while neglecting societal ills and the region's people. Nor can the United States pursue its regional interests alone. Our strategic reassessment of U.S. policies in the Middle East takes these considerations seriously, leading to a critical examination of how we deal with both partners and adversaries, both in and outside the region, and the policy tools we might better leverage to advance our strategic goals to the benefit of both the United States and the region.

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About the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy

This research was conducted within the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy, a center within International Programs at the RAND Corporation. The center brings together analytic excellence and regional expertise from across RAND to address the most critical political, social, and economic challenges facing the Middle East today. For more information about the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy, visit www.rand.org/international/cmepp or contact the director (contact information is provided on the webpage).

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Summary

With the start of a new administration in the United States, the coming months might offer an opportune moment for Washington to rethink some of the fundamental premises underlying American policymaking in the Middle East and review how the United States engages the Middle East, and—perhaps more fundamentally—for what purpose.

Such a review is long overdue. Past U.S. engagement in the Middle East has predominantly focused on opposing threats, from the Soviet Union during the Cold War to terrorist networks after September 11, 2001. For the past 40 years, countering Iranian influence has been among the more enduring tenets of U.S. policy. But what might a U.S. regional strategy look like if confronting such threats as Iran were no longer the primary organizing principle? What if our policies were devised to advance a long-term vision of what we are for, not just what we are against?

This report, produced by a team of RAND Corporation subject-matter experts, addresses that question by analyzing long-standing American interests and relationships with central partners and then considering an alternative framework in which the Iranian challenge is just one among several factors the United States should take into account. The research assesses the advantages and trade-offs of a reimagined regional strategy where strategic goals link to a broader understanding of stability that prioritizes reduced conflict, better governance, and greater growth and development.

The Case for an Alternative Policy Lens

Although Americans might be tiring of the Middle East after decades of war, this report argues for continued U.S. engagement. The conflicts and instability that emanate from this region can directly harm Americans and close allies. These conflicts produce negative spillover regionally and globally by fueling radicalization, violent extremism, arms proliferation, economic disruption, and refugee flows that have sparked political crises and dire humanitarian conditions. Washington cannot pretend that the effects of Middle East conflicts stop at the region's edge. At the same time, the region has untapped potential for economic growth and innovation. The challenge is thus not

whether to stay in the region but rather *how* we engage with it, and what realistic goals we might help advance with smarter policies.

The RAND research team finds that established U.S. policies in the Middle East—pursued across administrations and defined by a *threatism* mindset—have fallen short in advancing American interests and helping the region's people. U.S. policies also have failed to adapt to new regional and global conditions. Legacy aid packages and regional partnerships designed during the Cold War and the post–1990–1991 Gulf War eras, including massive arms packages to increasingly assertive Arab Gulf partners, are not advancing regional stability. They also are not responsive to populations demanding more-accountable governance to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Attempts to defeat adversaries and secure American primacy in the Middle East are also not feasible goals in a global and regional landscape with competing powers and other U.S. priorities. Moreover, the disproportionate focus on the Iranian threat has come at a cost for managing other regional challenges, including continued threats from nonstate extremist groups. And the heavy reliance on military instruments of power is only escalating regional conflict rather than reducing it.

The project team thus considers an alternative framework to guide U.S. strategy. This framework suggests that the U.S. strategic priority must center on reducing regional conflict and the drivers of conflict. Resolving—or at least de-escalating—current conflicts, preventing the emergence of future conflicts, and improving governance are essential to achieving genuine regional stability. These priorities are also necessary for advancing enduring U.S. interests in nonproliferation and countering violent extremism. This reimagined strategy thus puts a greater U.S. focus on addressing conflict and socioeconomic challenges that are creating both unsustainable pressures on the region's states and immense suffering among its people. In other words, the most fundamental aspects of the proposed strategy require restructuring our relationships to account for the needs of the region's people, not just its leaders, and reducing U.S. reliance on military tools in favor of economic and diplomatic investments in the region's future.

Moving Away from Threatism: Four Thematic Areas

To assess current policy and the proposed alternative framework, the RAND team reviewed and critiqued four aspects of U.S. engagement in the Middle East: (1) relations with **regional partners**; (2) the management of **adversarial threats**; (3) the role of **global competitors**, particularly China and Russia; and (4) **policy tools** to advance U.S. strategic objectives.

Regional Partners

The project team found that Washington has sought and continues to pursue regional partnerships based on a binary logic in which the United States cultivates one bloc of

states to oppose another. This approach means that the United States can lose track of whether the partnership advances broader U.S. interests beyond confronting an extra-regional or regional power. The team further found that significant risks—for example, entrapment, free-riding, U.S. reputational exposure, and the potential loss of partners to internal unrest—do not appear to be fully priced into the partnerships. A large share of U.S. assistance to support partnerships is based on legacy thinking about the need for financial incentives to bolster Israel's security against Arab state threats.

At the same time, the research team found too little attention paid to nonsecurity investments, such as improved governance, which might enhance regional stability. As Table S.1 shows, military-oriented peace and security grants dwarf other investments. For example, the United States devotes roughly an equivalent share of aid to Egypt's military as it does to economic support for the entire region in a given year. Moreover, just three states (Israel, Egypt, and Jordan—the "Big 3") consume the overwhelming share of the U.S. grant total. Of the slightly more than $6 billion in foreign military financing (FMF) apportioned globally in 2019, 81 percent went to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. This imbalance limits the depth of cooperation the United States can realize with other Middle Eastern countries outside the Big 3.

Adversarial Threats

In examining U.S. policies toward Iran, extremist nonstate actors—such as Shi'a militia groups, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Al Qaeda—and Syria, the research team found that Iran's power is more limited than conventional wisdom suggests. The research team also found that current U.S. policies are not calibrated to Iran's actual threat and that the U.S. policies of maximum pressure and unilateral sanctions have not significantly constrained Iran's nuclear program or curbed its destabilizing regional activities. A new approach to Iran will require not only restraining its nuclear program through multilateral diplomacy but also leveraging U.S. support for regional reforms to reduce the susceptibility of the region to Iranian influence. The goal should be changing the environment in which Iran operates rather than trying to change the Iranian regime itself; containing and deflating Iran's influence requires playing a long game.

Containing destabilization caused by Shi'a militia groups—which have been supported to varying degrees by Iran—requires bolstering the legitimate security forces in the areas in which they operate. Although the signature accomplishment of U.S. policy across administrations has been the destruction of ISIS's physical caliphate, the enduring defeat of that group depends on strong governance and security in areas where ISIS took root. Preventing a reoccurrence of ISIS control crucially depends on stabilizing the eastern half of Syria and supporting reform in Iraq that increases the legitimacy of the government and security forces in the eyes of all citizens—including the country's Sunni-Arab minority. Relegating Iraq to a theater for countering Iranian influence will abet—not reduce—conflict.

Table S.1
U.S. Assistance by Objective (Five-Year Annual Average, FY 2015–FY 2019, $U.S.)

Country	Peace and Security	Governing Justly and Democratically	Investing in People	Economic Growth	Humanitarian Assistance
Algeria	2,140,000	0	0	0	0
Bahrain	4,360,400	0	0	0	0
Egypt	1,292,140,000	12,700,000	55,360,000	58,040,000	0
Iraq	339,020,000	50,340,000	6,600,000	63,500,000	10,800,000
Israel	3,220,000,000	0	0	0	0
Jordan	534,780,000	62,020,000	213,520,000	519,880,000	0
Kuwait	0	0	0	0	0
Lebanon	112,060,000	17,260,000	58,220,000	27,560,000	0
Libya (GNA)	25,320,000	14,400,000	0	5,960,000	0
Morocco	18,580,000	8,260,000	5,880,000	4,460,000	0
Oman	4,679,400	0	0	0	0
Qatar	0	0	0	0	0
Saudi Arabia	7,400	0	0	0	0
Tunisia	82,820,000	30,540,000	0	39,660,000	0
Turkey	3,299,600	0	0	0	0
UAE	0	0	0	0	0
Yemen (ROYG)	16,460,000	9,880,000	17,620,000	3,120,000	243,620,000
Total	5,655,666,800	205,400,000	357,200,000	722,180,000	254,420,000

SOURCES: U.S. Agency for International Development, "Foreign Aid Explorer," webpage, undated; Andrew Miller, Seth Binder, and Louisa Keeler, *President Trump's FY21 Budget: Examining U.S. Assistance to the Middle East and North Africa in the Shadow of COVID-19*, Washington, D.C.: Project on Middle East Democracy, June 2020.

NOTES: Data show a five-year average, drawing on the Project on Middle East Democracy's (POMED's) reported data for fiscal year (FY) 2015–FY 2019 actual amount of foreign aid provided. FY 2020 data reflect only the requested amount; beginning in FY 2018, the U.S. Department of State recategorized "Governing Justly and Democratically" to "Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance;" for consistency of reporting, we and POMED have maintained the "Governing Justly and Democratically" title to categorize U.S. funding supporting democracy development and good governance. Additionally, there is a large discrepancy between the scope of U.S. humanitarian assistance as parsed by POMED, which reports only the bilateral top-line appropriations, and that reported in the U.S. Agency for International Development's Foreign Aid Explorer, which comprises both bilateral and multilateral accounts. Foreign Aid Explorer reports more than $2 billion in humanitarian relief to the region. GNA = Government of National Accord. ROYG = Republic of Yemen Government. UAE = United Arab Emirates.

Global Competitors

RAND researchers assessed the current postures of China and Russia in the region and the extent to which their policy aims might conflict with or support American strategic objectives. Russian interests in the Middle East tilt toward security and arms sales. It is using its involvement in the region, including military interventions, to rebuild its

status as a great power; obtain economic advantages through trade, investment, and stable oil markets; and maintain the status quo. China prioritizes economic exchange and investment. The Middle East plays an important role in China's Belt and Road Initiative to increase land, sea, and digital connectivity across Eurasia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa into Europe. There is a risk that Chinese and Russian influence in the region could increase if the United States reorients its strategy toward the Middle East, as states in the region hedge their historical relationships with Washington and expand economic and security ties with U.S. competitors.

However, both competitors face limits in the region, and with Washington focused on great-power competition, there is a risk that seeing the region through this lens could preclude cooperation that might benefit American interests. Both China and Russia have shared interests with the United States in nonproliferation, for example, and support the Iran nuclear agreement. As a major source of global demand for energy, China has an interest in regional calm and stable energy prices, whereas the United States and Russia, as major energy producers, have an interest in stable prices that enable long-term investments in exploration and development. A region with less violent extremism, more prosperity, and stronger nonproliferation trends will benefit all three global powers. To be sure, Russia and China are competing with the United States in the Middle East, and growing Russian and Chinese engagement has led to actions that work against U.S. interests, such as Russia's military intervention in Syria or China's expansion of communication technology with concerning security components, including systems that can be used for surveillance and population control. But competition can be tempered by partially overlapping objectives that provide opportunities for cooperation in areas that do not infringe on U.S. interests.

Policy Tools

RAND researchers explored the *means* by which the United States attempts to achieve its objectives; reviewed economic, diplomatic, and other instruments for American engagement; and made recommendations for recalibrating U.S. regional investments. They found that U.S. military assistance to the Middle East and North Africa region has far outpaced economic aid, with the Middle East receiving more than 50 percent of total U.S. military aid globally. U.S. force presence in the region (excluding Afghanistan) remains steady at just less than 50,000 deployed U.S. troops. Security cooperation and economic assistance programs also are not routinely or rigorously assessed for effectiveness in achieving intended outcomes and the avoidance of counterproductive effects.

Policy Recommendations: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments

The resources of the United States are not limitless, but there are more practical and cost-effective ways to stay engaged in the Middle East that would benefit both the United States and the region. Several pillars could guide U.S. policymakers should they choose to pursue the alternative strategy outlined in this report as they adapt to new regional, global, and domestic realities:

- The United States could *shift resources* from the current heavy reliance on military tools to a more balanced approach that prioritizes economic investments, governance, diplomacy, and programs focused on people. This will entail making hard policy decisions, such as reducing sales of high-end weaponry in favor of equipment that is tailored to defensive purposes and closing the gap between the Big 3 aid recipients and other regional partners. The resource shift away from military tools also will require a counterterrorism focus on nonmilitary programs to counter violent extremism; increased support for domestic reform efforts already underway and supported by leaders across the Arab world; and regular evaluations of all assistance programs based on data and proven measures of effectiveness. Resources would move to those countries and programs that produce desired outcomes in support of U.S. strategic goals.
- Regional initiatives and investments could *favor a long-term time horizon* to reduce conflict and support regional growth and development, even at the cost of short-term risks. This would involve increasing engagement with Middle Eastern publics on such issues as health, youth unemployment, and climate change; investing in human development programs; supporting civil-society capacity-building efforts in permissive environments; and maintaining a spotlight on human rights abuses at the highest levels of government, including consistent pressure for the release of political prisoners in both adversarial and partner countries.
- The United States could *work multilaterally* with regional and global partners, and at times even with global competitors, to address common challenges. This would include supporting de-escalation talks between Arab Gulf monarchies and Iran; a diplomatic effort with other international powers to establish a regional security forum in the Middle East similar to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; and the continuation of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS with an expanded focus on countering extremism.

Such a strategy requires a shift from a military to a nonmilitary mindset. It requires recalibrating U.S. military support and reducing arms sales while increasing economic, trade, and financial investments. It calls for more diplomatic initiative to break out of the current cycle of conflict and escalation that is too costly for the United States and for the region's people. Our assessment suggests that working toward such

a long-term agenda with partners, both regionally and globally, is an investment that will pay far higher dividends, and at far lower costs, than continuing on our present path. U.S. regional policies are largely making outmoded investments in the past, investments that have contributed to more regional conflict and violent extremism that put Americans in harm's way. Now is the time to break this cycle and consider strategically investing in a positive vision for the region that is oriented toward the future.

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Abbreviations

5G	fifth-generation mobile
9/11	terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CTEF	Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
ESF	Economic Support Fund
FMF	foreign military financing
FMS	foreign military sales
FTO	foreign terrorist organization
FY	fiscal year
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	gross domestic product
GFA	Global Fragility Act
GJD	governing justly and democratically
GNA	Government of National Accord (Libya)
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IMET	International Military Education and Training

INCLE	International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
LH	Lebanese Hizballah
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NADR	Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining and Related Programs
NED	The National Endowment for Democracy
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NSS	National Security Strategy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
POMED	Project on Middle East Democracy
QME	qualitative military edge
RDIF	Russian Direct Investment Fund
ROYG	Republic of Yemen Government
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System
TIFA	trade and investment framework agreement
UAE	United Arab Emirates
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Why a Rethink?

U.S. policy in the Middle East across successive administrations has, on balance, failed to produce positive results for American interests or for the region. The administration of Joe Biden will inevitably face a multitude of challenges and continuing crises stemming from the Middle East. But will maintaining long-standing U.S. policies produce different, better outcomes in the future? Or is it time to reimagine some of the fundamental premises underlying American policymaking in the region?

We suggest the latter, arguing that a reassessment of traditional approaches and a consideration of an alternative strategic framing is a matter of urgency for U.S. national interests. Despite such trends as growing U.S. energy independence, persistent conflicts in the Middle East continue to threaten Americans' security and contribute to instability in allied European countries as regional wars produce unprecedented refugee flows and violent extremism. And yet the region also offers untapped opportunities for growth and development, particularly if we are realistic about our long-term goals and the limitations of what U.S. policy can—and cannot—influence.

Long-standing U.S. engagement in the Middle East has focused on countering threats, from the Soviet Union during the Cold War to terrorist networks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11). For the past 40 years, the perceived need to counter Iranian influence has been among the more enduring tenets of U.S. policy, with the U.S. government investing considerable attention and resources in this challenge. Although any serious strategy must contend with Iran, our analysis considers what a U.S. regional strategy might look like if confronting Iran, and pursuing a *threatism* approach (i.e., confronting the threat of the day) more generally, were no longer the primary organizing principle for U.S. policymaking in this region.

In this report, we analyze established American interests and relationships with central partners, adversaries, and global competitors, along with the policy tools employed by the United States. We then consider an alternative framework wherein the Iranian challenge is one among several factors the United States should take into account. In assessing the alternative framework, we considered the following four large questions:

- How would a U.S. strategy in the Middle East look if our approach shifted from a military-oriented mindset and emphasis on threatism to a positive vision of a less conflict-prone region, one in which the sources of extremism and military competition were reduced to manageable levels?
- What if our policies were devised to advance a long-term vision of what we are for, not just what we are against?
- What type of Middle East do we want to see emerge from the turmoil of the past decades of conflict, and what realistic objectives can we help advance?
- How would key instruments of U.S. policy—political, security, economic, diplomatic, and informational—need to adjust to support a more stable, less conflict-prone region that serves its people as well as its leaders?

Reimagining American strategy in the Middle East with a positive (but not idealized) vision of outcomes—rather than focusing only on the threats we are trying to contain—could lead to a new set of policy options for future decisionmakers to consider. Despite the aspirations of U.S. officials to pivot away from the Middle East and focus on great-power competition,[1] challenges emanating from a region mired in instability, poor governance, and interstate rivalry will continue to affect U.S. interests. This reality suggests that American policymakers will need to stay engaged with the Middle East whether they would like to or not.

But it is possible to rethink *how* we engage the region and, perhaps most critically, for *what purpose*. At a time of unprecedented economic and public health crises, shifting great-power dynamics, new global energy realities, and fundamental debates about the purpose of U.S. power, we have an opportunity to consider novel approaches to the Middle East. In this report, we consider a framework that goes beyond a short-term crisis-management agenda. We offer an assessment of the advantages and trade-offs of an alternative regional strategy that is focused on longer-term goals that can advance the U.S. interest in greater stability by reducing conflict and the drivers of conflict while improving the lives of the people living in the region.

Indeed, after more than a decade of popular uprisings against corrupt, repressive, and incompetent governance in various Middle Eastern countries, no U.S. strategy is likely to succeed without taking into account the well-being and dignity of the region's people. With the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and climate change creating a toxic mix when combined with the region's conflicts and governance fail-

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[1] National Defense Strategy (NDS) and National Security Strategy (NSS) documents in the administrations of both Barack Obama and Donald Trump expressed a desire to reduce investments in the Middle East and turn attention to great-power competition, particularly China's rise. See U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., January 20, 2018; The White House, *National Security Strategy*, Washington, D.C., May 2010; and The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017.

ures, future U.S. strategy can no longer afford to remain at the state and leadership level while neglecting societal ills.

Our strategic reassessment of U.S. policies in the Middle East takes these considerations seriously, leading to a critical look at how we deal with regional partners, adversaries and global competitors, as well as the policy tools we leverage to advance our strategic goals. In short, we test the proposition that adopting a different approach might yield better results, both for the region and for the United States.

Threatism Has Driven Previous U.S. Regional Policy

U.S. policies in the Middle East have evolved since World War II, but the central organizing principle of the U.S. approach has not. That is to say, U.S. policies in the Middle East have largely been driven by confronting the threat of the day. Whether it was Soviet influence, nationalist Arab leaders, terrorist networks, or, after 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran, U.S. policy centered on confronting external threats in a bid to assert American predominance over regional affairs. This has primarily been accomplished by cultivating and favoring regional partners, or *pillars*, through security relationships and military assistance to advance this agenda with little investment in or attention paid to the development or well-being of the people living in the region. Repressive leaders were tolerated if they ruled "moderate" states viewed as central to confronting U.S. adversaries in the region—a necessary evil to protect American interests. This prevailing realpolitik, zero-sum view of regional politics has underpinned U.S. policymaking across both Democratic and Republican administrations.

During the Cold War, countering the Soviet Union was the primary concern, and regional alignments were structured around confronting the pro-Soviet axis through partnerships with status-quo regional powers; specifically, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and Egypt in the 1980s. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States pursued a dual containment strategy to counter both Iran and Iraq in the 1990s. After 9/11, the United States shifted from this containment strategy to a focus on the preemptive elimination of threats, as espoused by then-President George W. Bush in the so-called "Bush Doctrine."[2]

Under the banner of the Global War on Terror, the United States engaged in a series of major military interventions in the region to counter new nonstate threats—most notably in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although such military campaigns were primarily designed to counter threats posed by Al Qaeda and other Sunni extremist groups, and although the Bush administration's precise motives for invading Iraq in 2003 are still a matter of debate, they were also couched in terms of democracy promotion. Such framing marked at least a rhetorical departure from the threatism that had defined the previous era. The Bush administration's "Freedom Agenda" included measures to

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[2] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "The Bush Doctrine," reprinted from *Front Page Magazine*, October 7, 2002.

support the development of democracy, civil society, and the rule of law in Iraq and the broader region, although the turmoil in the country and the rise of new extremist groups overshadowed this agenda.[3]

However, even during this period of heightened attention on global terrorism, concerns about Iran still shaped American policies, particularly Iranian threats to oil supplies from the Persian Gulf, threats to Israel, and support for terrorism. U.S. military planning has for decades been based on such scenarios as Iran attempting to close the Strait of Hormuz or seizing oil infrastructure in the Persian Gulf. Massive U.S. arms sales to such partners as Saudi Arabia are framed with the Iranian threat in mind, as are recent efforts to facilitate Arab-Israeli normalization.

Indeed, concerns about Iran's expanding influence spiked considerably following the 2003 ouster of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Iran's most-significant regional adversary.[4] Not only did the American invasion of Iraq dramatically overturn the regional balance of power, it also significantly increased the U.S. military presence in the region that continues to this day. With the exception of the 1990–1991 Gulf War, when the United States deployed hundreds of thousands of forces to the Gulf, the Middle East was a small driver of U.S. global force presence in the 1990s.[5] U.S. forward presence in Europe was an order of magnitude larger than in the Middle East and, along with Asia, constituted the overwhelming share of U.S. forces deployed in the 1990s.[6] The 2003 Iraq war shifted that balance, making the Middle East a significant driver of U.S. forward deployments. Today, the United States has postured an estimated 46,454 U.S. forces in the Middle East.[7] Although some of those forces support operations in Iraq and Syria, countering Iran is also a major mission driving these deployments.

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[3] Bruce Gilley, "Did Bush Democratize the Middle East? The Effects of External-Internal Linkages," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 128, No. 4, December 2013, p. 658.

[4] Frederic Wehrey, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Jessica Watkins, Jeffrey Martini, and Robert A. Guffey, *The Iraq Effect: The Middle East After the Iraq War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-892-AF, 2010.

[5] Our definition of *the Middle East* includes all Arab states, Turkey, Iran, and Israel. We do not include South Asian states, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan.

[6] According to the Heritage Foundation's Global U.S. Troop Deployment database, there were 1,541,856 U.S. troops deployed in Europe and 835,679 in East Asia throughout the 1990s; by comparison, there were only 155,750 U.S. troops deployed in the Middle East during this decade (most of which, as mentioned, can be accounted for by Gulf War deployments). Although the precise numbers of U.S. troop deployments are contested and there is no definitive source on this topic, the numbers from the Heritage database at least illustrate the vast differential between troops in the Middle East and Europe or Asia and the broad trend lines of U.S. global deployments. See Tim Kane, *Global U.S. Troop Deployment, 1950–2003*, Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, October 27, 2004.

[7] As we noted earlier, our definition of the Middle East excludes Afghanistan, which, since 2001, has accounted for a substantial amount of troop deployments in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) theater. The 46,454 figure is drawn from International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2020*, Vol. 120, London, 2020, and includes U.S. troops stationed in Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Arab uprisings starting in late 2010 only reinforced concerns about instability in the Middle East and Iran's ability to capitalize on the chaos to expand its influence through nonstate actors, such as Hizballah in Lebanon, Shi'a militia groups in Iraq, or Houthi rebels in Yemen. Also, Iran's ability to keep Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power, with the vital support of the Russian intervention in 2015, furthered the narrative of rising Iranian power. Although Iran's regional influence often has been exaggerated and its vulnerabilities overlooked, the widespread perception in Washington is that Iran has been "on the march" and is expanding its foothold across the region.[8] Echoing Iran's own grandiose claims,[9] analyses in many Arab capitals, in Israel, and from several Washington think tanks regularly refer to Iran as controlling four capitals—in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—and base regional assessments on the premise that Iran is the region's primary source of instability.[10]

Early in his first term, President Obama sought to adopt a more people-centric approach to the Middle East, declaring his intent—in a high-profile speech in 2011—to "broaden [U.S.] engagement based upon mutual interests and mutual respect . . . [because the United States has] a stake not just in the stability of nations, but in the self determination of individuals."[11] Therefore, with echoes of the Bush administration's Freedom Agenda, Obama stated that it would "be the policy [and first priority] of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy."[12] Despite initial efforts to shift the focus to the people of the region and capitalize on the momentum from the Arab Spring, Obama's stance toward the region did not in practice depart dramatically from the realpolitik of previous administrations,[13] and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (or the Islamic

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8 For analyses highlighting the limits of Iranian power, see Michael Wahid Hanna and Dalia Dassa Kaye, "The Limits of Iranian Power," *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 5, October–November 2015; and Frederic Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, and Jennifer J. Li, *Dangerous But Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-781-AF, 2009.

9 Mamoon Alabbasi, "Iran Continues to Boast of Its Regional Reach," *Middle East Eye*, March 13, 2015.

10 Baria Alamuddin, "Iran Finalizes Its Regional Corridor of Control," *Arab News*, October 20, 2019; Michael Segall, "How Iran Views the Fall of Sana'a, Yemen: 'The Fourth Arab Capital in Our Hands,'" Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, November 3, 2014; Lee Smith, "Nuclear Dreams: Iran Now Controls Four Arab Capitals, Plus Washington, D.C.," Hudson Institute, February 5, 2015.

11 "Transcript: Obama's Speech About The Arab World," NPR, May 19, 2011. In this 2011 speech, Obama references a speech he made in Cairo in 2009, in which he stated

> I've come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition (The White House, "Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 6-04-09," Washington, D.C., June 4, 2009).

12 "Transcript: Obama's Speech About The Arab World," 2011.

13 For one perspective on why Obama's Middle East policy fell short, see Aaron David Miller, "Why Obama Failed in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, April 2, 2013.

State of Iraq and al-Sham, hereafter ISIS) forced the administration to focus on countering terrorism as it forged an international coalition to confront it.

Although the United States was still mired in the region because of the rise of ISIS, the Obama administration ultimately sought to shift its focus to Asia and disengage from the conflicts of the Middle East.[14] The one exception was Iran policy, which remained a high priority, leading the Obama administration to engage Iran in multilateral negotiations resulting in the 2015 nuclear agreement, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). However, despite Obama's attempt to present a more balanced U.S. approach by not picking sides between regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia, U.S. policies continued to support major arms sales to the Saudis and containment policies toward Iran, largely maintaining the wide array of unilateral U.S. sanctions outside the nuclear agreement. Moreover, while seeking to end U.S. involvement in the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration adopted "an aggressive policy of drone strikes and special operations aimed at taking out terrorist commanders," resulting in an approach to the region that, rhetoric aside, ultimately continued many of the counterterrorism policies of the Bush administration.[15]

President Trump's withdrawal of the United States from the Iran nuclear agreement and subsequent maximum pressure campaign has intensified the U.S. focus on the Iranian threat and marked the most confrontational of policies against Iran to date. The Trump administration's reinstatement of American unilateral and secondary sanctions has weakened Iranian compliance with the JCPOA and increased Iranian escalation in the region, including attacks on tankers in the Gulf, attacks on Aramco's oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, and the shooting down of a U.S. drone. The escalation between the United States and Iran moved to direct conflict following the Trump administration's decision to assassinate Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 and Iran's missile attack in response against American personnel based in Iraq. Cyberwarfare and indirect conflict, through attacks between Iranian-aligned militia groups in Iraq and U.S. forces, is ongoing.

Despite the administration's NSS, which continued the trend toward a focus on great-power competition, President Trump increased U.S. forces in the region, with the Iran threat serving as a key rationale for continued U.S. engagement.[16] The Middle East continues to draw significant American attention as measured by force posture and asset commitments. Figure 1.1 shows that the amount of time that U.S. aircraft

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14 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

15 Brian Michael Jenkins, "President Obama's Controversial Legacy as Counterterrorism-in-Chief," RAND Blog, August 22, 2016.

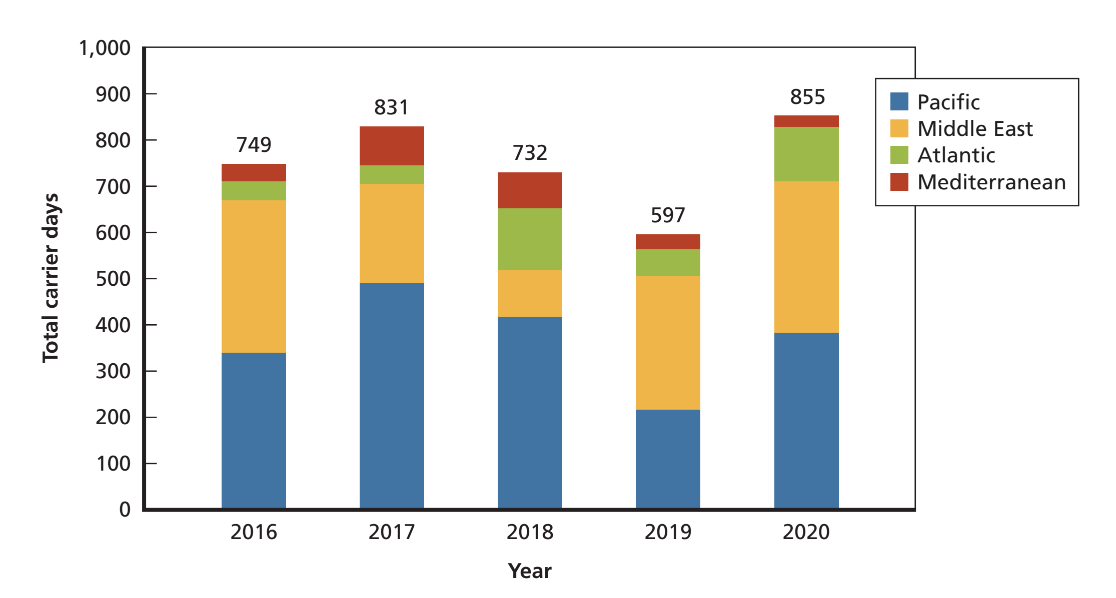
16 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How U.S. Troops Are Preparing for the Worst in the Middle East," *New York Times*, January 7, 2020.

carriers spend on deployments to the region makes up a significant portion of the total number of days carriers are on deployment around the world.[17]

Beyond force presence, Iran continues to be the focal point of U.S. regional policy, whether in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or beyond. Indeed, major U.S. security missions in the region that do not have an Iran focus still contain counter-Iran elements. For instance, the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF)—which, as its title suggests, is operationally focused on combating the Islamic State—exhibits counter-Iran motivations. This is reflected in the U.S. Department of Defense's (DoD's) annual CTEF budget justification, which states that the fund and support to Iraqi partners provide a "political and physical counterweight to Iranian . . . influence" in Iraq.[18] Furthermore, the Trump administration doubled down on the long-standing U.S. reliance on bilateral arms sales and security relationships with regional partners at the expense of multilateral, diplomatic, and economic investments in the region.



Figure 1.1
Total Carrier Days Deployed per Year, 2016–2020



SOURCE: Adapted from Eckstein, 2020.
NOTE: The total for 2020 is current as of October 31, 2020.

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[17] Megan Eckstein, "No Margin Left: Overworked Carrier Force Struggles to Maintain Deployments After Decades of Overuse," USNI News, November 12, 2020.

[18] Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2018: Justification for FY 2018 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO)—Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF)*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, May 2017, p. 15.

U.S. Interests and Strategic Goals in a Changing Regional and Global Environment

Setting New Priorities and Realistic Goals in an Altered Regional Landscape

The need to revisit established American interests in the Middle East in an era of growing energy independence, fatigue with past U.S. military interventions, and economic challenges at home is becoming more prevalent across the political spectrum. Institutions with varied foreign policy orientations—from the restraint-oriented Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft to the more-centrist Center for a New American Security and the Brookings Institution—have issued papers calling for similar policy shifts in the region, particularly the need to demilitarize American engagement and increase diplomacy, including with adversaries.[19] Former U.S. officials and analysts have penned analogous articles focused on shifting the instruments of U.S. power in the Middle East from military to economic and diplomatic means.[20] Our analysis similarly considers such a shift, although we also reflect on the outcomes we are trying to achieve in the region, not just the mechanisms to get us there.

Traditional U.S. interests in the region—protecting oil, Israel, and U.S. predominance—are no longer the critical priorities in a changed strategic landscape. Indeed, the United States was largely successful in maintaining these regional interests over the past decades, although at times at high cost. Some analysts argue that such long-standing interests should continue to drive U.S. regional policy and presence in the region.[21] But we suggest that the altered regional and global landscape requires a fresh look at core U.S. objectives.

The United States became a net energy exporter in 2019 for the first time since 1952.[22] Although energy security in the Middle East is still critical, given our allies' continued reliance on Middle East oil, the global economic crises and oil price plunge likely have deflated the power and influence of oil-rich states in the region for the

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[19] See Ilan Goldenberg and Kaleigh Thomas, *Demilitarizing U.S. Policy in the Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, July 20, 2020; Paul R. Pillar, Andrew Bacevich, Annelle Sheline, and Trita Parsi, *A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America's Misguided Policy of Domination*, Washington, D.C.: Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, July 17, 2020; and Dafna H. Rand and Andrew P. Miller, eds., *Re-Engaging the Middle East: A New Vision for U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, September 22, 2020.

[20] Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, "America's Opportunity in the Middle East: Diplomacy Could Succeed Where Military Force Has Failed," *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2020; Daniel Benaim and Michael Wahid Hanna, "The Enduring American Presence in the Middle East: The U.S. Military Footprint Has Hardly Changed Under Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, August 7, 2019.

[21] See, for instance, Hal Brands, "Why America Can't Quit the Middle East," Hoover Institution, Issue 1921, March 21, 2019; and Robert Satloff, Ian S. Lustick, Mara Karlin, and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "Commitment Issues: Where Should the U.S. Withdrawal from the Middle East Stop?" *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2019.

[22] See U.S. Energy Information Administration, "U.S. Energy Facts Explained," webpage, updated April 27, 2020.

foreseeable future. The United States is simply less dependent on the region from an energy perspective. American support for Israel's security is likely to remain strong across the political spectrum for strategic, historical, and domestic reasons, but Israel is the strongest military power in the region and does not depend on the United States for its security. With Israel's Arab neighbors in disarray domestically and after they recently demonstrated their openness to normalization even without substantive progress toward peace with the Palestinians, Israel sees itself on strong strategic footing. Although a viable and just settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is still critical for regional peace, other regional conflicts have overshadowed it in recent years, particularly in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. As a consequence, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer the U.S. priority it once was, even as concerns about an eroding two-state solution grow.[23]

Finally, maintaining American predominance in the region might not be feasible in an era of great-power competition and in the aftermath of costly U.S. military interventions that have reduced the appetite for more. The global economic downturn likely will only increase the number of domestic voices calling for more restraint in U.S. foreign policy and demands for leaders to focus on challenges at home. The higher-priority American regional interests in today's geostrategic environment are preventing extremism and nonproliferation; these are the interests that can harm Americans at home or close to home. A region embroiled in conflict, as the Middle East is today, presents the greatest threat to these core American interests because conflict creates a fertile environment for extremism and destabilizing weapons proliferation. Indeed, any conceivable American interest in the region (including the free flow of oil and Israeli security), requires greater regional stability, and particularly a reduction in—if not an end to—devastating regional wars like those of the past decade.

Consequently, *enhancing regional stability through the reduction of conflict* is the central, overriding objective driving our strategic assessment. But our notion of stability is not the traditional concept of states led by strongmen keeping regional order. That concept is not only an outdated model for a region immersed in continued soci-

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[23] For this reason, we do not focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in depth, although the strategy we consider—particularly the need to reduce regional conflicts and drivers of conflicts—would apply to the Israeli-Palestinian arena as well. Moreover, several other RAND studies have explored this conflict in great detail, including C. Ross Anthony, Daniel Egel, Charles P. Ries, Craig A. Bond, Andrew Liepman, Jeffrey Martini, Steven Simon, Shira Efron, Bradley D. Stein, Lynsay Ayer, and Mary E. Vaiana, *The Costs of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-740-1-DCR, 2015; RAND Palestinian State Study Team, *Building a Successful Palestinian State*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-146-1-DCR, 2007; and Doug Suisman, Steven Simon, Glenn Robinson, C. Ross Anthony, and Michael Schoenbaum, *The Arc: A Formal Structure for a Palestinian State*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-327-2-GG, 2005. More-recent reports consider new strategies for addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in light of growing strains on the two-state solution, including Ilan Goldenberg, Michael Koplow, and Tamara Cofman Wittes, *A New U.S. Strategy for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, December 16, 2020; and International Crisis Group and the U.S./Middle East Project, "Three Pillars for a New U.S. Approach to Peace in Israel-Palestine," statement, December 15, 2020.

etal unrest against authoritarian and corrupt governance, but also has not brought stability to the Middle East. Authoritarian leaders with zero-sum views of security have only intensified interstate competition and civil wars in the region. Our concept of what contributes to stability thus includes better governance, human and economic development, and rule of law—essentially, leaders who are accountable to their people and who have better capacity to deliver critical services.

We are not arguing that stability requires a strategy that brings democracy and peace to the region. That simply is neither realistic in the foreseeable future nor a goal that the United States has the power to dictate—that will be up to the region's people to decide. But the persistence of widespread protests across the region reminds us of the perils of ignoring the underlying societal issues and failed governance that are fueling grievance, instability, and conflict. The United States can pursue policies that support this wider understanding of stability that encompasses less conflict and violent extremism, including policies that address the root causes of instability and extremism, which are linked to an array of socioeconomic and political challenges.

But how do we (1) advance the strategic goal of greater stability and reduced conflict and (2) avoid actions that undermine it with alternative policies that are feasible, effective, and sensitive to cost in an era of limited resources? That is the core question we will address as we consider an alternative U.S. strategy that departs from long-held assumptions and practices toward the region.

Why the Middle East Still Matters: Moving Beyond the "Should We Stay or Should We Go" Debates

Before considering a new strategy, some might ask, "Why bother?" Frustration with the high costs of U.S. military interventions in the Middle East and competing priorities at home and abroad have provoked an understandable debate about whether the United States should continue to invest its resources and maintain its military presence in the region or cut its losses and shift its focus elsewhere.[24] Such debates are healthy and long overdue for a region that has consumed U.S. foreign policy and resources for decades. But the key question for U.S. policy in the region is not whether we "stay or go," but *how* we engage the region. As suggested earlier, a reimagined strategy that focuses less on military presence and assistance and more on diplomacy, economic investment, and governance might provide a more effective way to stay engaged rather than turning our backs on the region altogether.

It is true that from the narrow perspective of energy security the Middle East matters less than it once did. But this is a short-sighted view of the region's importance. It is exactly because this region is so dysfunctional today that it is still critically impor-

[24] Martin Indyk, "The Middle East Isn't Worth It Anymore," *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020; Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 1, January/February 2019; Justin Logan, "The Case for Withdrawing from the Middle East," *Defense Priorities*, September 2020.

tant for U.S. interests. Poor governance and weak state capacity create fertile ground for unrest, extremism, and humanitarian crises that have a global impact, including on the United States. When such extremist groups as ISIS rise to power, or when mass displacement leads to political turmoil among our European partners and the rise of anti-democratic forces, U.S. interests are endangered.[25]

And although U.S. policies over the past decades might have largely succeeded in such aims as securing access to waterways and military bases and protecting regional partners, they have not succeeded in reducing regional conflict; they arguably have contributed to heightened conflict. Indeed, the Middle East has one of the worst track records in the world when it comes to conflict, particularly intra-state or nonstate conflict. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, in the post–World War II era, the Middle East has consistently been the third-most conflict-affected region in the world in terms of interstate conflicts, second to Asia and Africa. When it comes to nonstate conflicts, the Middle East has overtaken Asia in the past decade and produced the second-highest number of conflicts in the world, at times eclipsing Africa as well.[26]

Finally, the conflict and crises emanating from this region do not stay in the region. The risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, not to mention the continued conventional arms race, is a global harm. The likely increase in climate-induced migration in the years ahead, or pandemics that do not stop at national borders, can directly affect Americans' safety. The strategic goal of a more stable and less conflict-prone Middle East, which is based on a broad understanding of what contributes to stability, is still a vital interest for the United States. The Middle East, in short, does still matter. The region is worth our continued investment. The challenge is how we go about that investment, who we invest in, and what realistic goals we might help advance.

A Road Map for Building An Alternative Regional Strategy: Organization of the Report

Keeping these interests and strategic goals in mind, we will address thematic areas of U.S. engagement in the region in the subsequent chapters, assessing current approaches and alternative policies that might support a revised strategy. These thematic areas focus on (1) relations with **regional partners**; (2) the management of **adversarial threats**; (3) the role of **global competitors**, particularly China and Russia; and (4) **policy tools** to advance U.S. strategic objectives. The report concludes with an overall assessment and policy recommendations for a reimagined U.S. strategy for the Middle East.

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[25] See Esri, "The Migrant Crisis and the Rise of Populism in Europe," ArcGIS story map, undated.

[26] Uppsala Conflict Data Program, "UCDP Dataset Download Center," webpage, undated.

Chapter Two on regional partners will provide an overview of states that are aligned with the United States, laying out metrics to assess the depth and nature of the current relationships and partner performance on key U.S. priorities. We assess the benefits of current relationships and potential costs, including the risks of embroiling the United States in military conflict, helping fuel ongoing regional conflicts and extremist groups, opening up opportunities for global competitors, contributing to internal divisions within regional states, and empowering authoritarian leaders and increasing repression. The partner analysis will consider the benefits and trade-offs of revamped relationships if the strategic objectives are less about countering Iran and more about promoting long-term regional stability through development and improved governance.

Chapter Three on regional adversaries and related conflicts addresses U.S. policy toward Iran, nonstate actors—such as Shi'a militia groups, ISIS, and Al Qaeda—and Syria. In the Iran section, we consider the nature of the Iranian threat, assess the effectiveness of long-standing pressure policies, and offer an alternative approach for mitigating Iranian nuclear and regional ambitions and deflating Iran's influence over the longer term. In assessing U.S. policies toward Shi'a militia forces, Sunni extremist groups, and such adversarial regional states as Syria, we also evaluate the success of current efforts and suggest alternative polices focused on management and containment rather than defeat. We focus on the U.S. relationship with Iraq as a particularly pivotal partner in defusing conflict and extremism.

In Chapter Four, after considering U.S. policies toward both partners and adversaries, we address global competitors; specifically, China and Russia, their current postures in the region, and the extent to which their policy aims might conflict or overlap with American strategic objectives.

Chapter Five turns to the *means* by which we attempt to achieve our objectives, including the current reliance on military investments. We then review other instruments for American engagement, including economic aid and diplomacy, and offer recommendations for recalibrating U.S. regional investments where necessary.

The concluding Chapter Six synthesizes the findings from the previous thematic chapters to formulate the policy prescriptions required should future policymakers choose to pursue an alternative strategy for the region.

CHAPTER TWO

Toward Aligning Partnerships with U.S. Interests

Building on the preceding analysis of American interests in the Middle East, we examine how U.S. partnerships could be recalibrated to best advance those interests. After presenting the overall rationale for investing in partnerships in the region and the benefits and risks partnerships entail, we review how the United States initially selected into key partnerships, many of which endure today. We also identify areas of misalignment between the current prioritization of partnerships and what we assess to be core American interests. Finally, we highlight missed opportunities in the focus of current partnerships and present a vision for realizing this untapped potential.

We find that Washington has largely sought and continues to pursue regional partnerships based on a binary logic in which the United States cultivates one bloc of states to oppose another. This approach means that the United States can lose track of whether the partnership advances broader American interests beyond containing an extra-regional or regional power. We further find that significant risks—including entrapment, free-riding, U.S. reputational exposure, and the potential loss of partners to internal unrest—do not appear to be fully priced into the partnerships. We also find that a large share of U.S. assistance to support partnerships is based on legacy thinking about the need for financial incentives to bolster Israel's security against Arab state threats.

On the other side of the ledger, we find too little attention paid to nonsecurity investments, such as good governance, which might enhance regional stability. We also find an unbalanced approach to U.S. engagement, with just three states (Israel, Egypt, and Jordan) consuming the overwhelming share of U.S. grants, and two Arab Gulf states (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) as the focal points of U.S. weapons sales. We therefore recommend broadening engagement with other Middle East partners, with a particular focus on states that have shown a commitment to inclusive governance and de-escalating regional conflict.

The Rationale for Partnerships

The 2018 NDS argues strongly for investing in alliances and partnerships. As it pertains to the Middle East, the guidance instructs that

> We will foster a stable and secure Middle East that denies safe havens for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and that contributes to stable global energy markets and secure trade routes. We will develop enduring coalitions to consolidate gains we have made in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, to support the lasting defeat of terrorists as we sever their sources of strength and counterbalance Iran.[1]

As U.S. leaders again consider how much priority to place on partnerships with Middle Eastern states and how to manage those partnerships it does enter into, it is important to link these efforts to U.S. interests in the region. In the formulation we present in this study, partnerships are not an end in and of themselves; they are a means for achieving broader interests. This is a departure from periods when a country's alignment with the United States—which, during the Cold War, often was expressed in whether the state rested in Washington's or Moscow's "orbit"—was itself an objective. It is also a departure from such formulations as the 2018 NDS, in which partnerships are explicitly judged relative to their utility in balancing such threats as Iran.

In today's Middle East, partnerships would be best used as tools to advance regional stability. Stability, which we believe can be achieved via reduced tensions between regional powers, improved governance, and more-capable and -responsible local security actors, offers a pathway for the United States to benefit from its engagement with the region. This is as opposed to engagement that operates as a drain on U.S. military readiness, standing in the world, and finances. Countering terrorism is one of the important missions that contributes to both regional stability and the security of the American homeland. Likewise, nonproliferation efforts contribute to both regional and homeland security.

Although partnerships are a critical tool, they bring advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, partnerships—if they are selected and managed appropriately—can offer the United States useful burden-sharing in providing for the defense of the region. Even if the United States reduces its role as a security provider in the Middle East, as many are calling for,[2] it will remain an important actor in the region's security for at least the near and middle terms. This is because many states in the region depend on the United States as a security guarantor and lack the capability to provide for their own defense. It is also because the nature of the security threats in the region, which

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[1] DoD, 2018, p. 9.

[2] Karlin and Wittes, 2019; Pillar et al., 2020.

include transnational terror groups that aspire to strike the U.S. homeland, creates risk for the United States that must be mitigated.

To avoid unnecessarily sapping attention and readiness from other issues, the United States can invest in partner capabilities that reduce dependence on U.S. military support. As discussed later in Chapter Five, past efforts to build partner military capabilities have yielded mixed results. And those results appear to be held back by the quality of governance and institutional capacity of partners.[3] But successful partnerships, such as developing the counterterrorism capabilities of the Lebanese Armed Forces and Jordanian Armed Forces, are reminders of the promise that regional actors can prevent wider outbreaks of violence that draw the U.S. military into a combat role.[4] Having U.S. Special Operations Forces provide this training and conduct more-limited lethal action is also a way to avoid large-scale conventional deployments.[5] And there are additional opportunities to enhance outcomes by considering ways in which good governance, along with security cooperation, can contribute to a more stable region.

In addition to burden-sharing, the United States would directly and indirectly benefit from a more prosperous Middle East, which partnerships can help achieve. The direct benefit of a more prosperous Middle East is *increased trade and investment opportunities* for the United States. Even under optimistic scenarios, the Middle East lacks trade and investment opportunities that are comparable with those of the economies of Europe or East Asia. But there are pockets of opportunity in the region, such as the more diversified economy of the UAE or the quality of human capital in Oman,[6] that do present opportunities for U.S. business beyond the energy sector. The potential indirect benefit is that a more prosperous Middle East also might be a more

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3 Michael McNerney, Angela O'Mahony, Thomas S. Szayna, Derek Eaton, Caroline Baxter, Colin P. Clarke, Emma Cutrufello, Michael McGee, Heather Peterson, Leslie Adrienne Payne, and Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, *Assessing Security Cooperation as a Preventive Tool*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-350-A, 2014.

4 For a positive assessment of the Lebanese Armed Forces's (LAF's) progress in building its counterterrorism capabilities with U.S. assistance, see Nicholas Blanford's conclusion that "The LAF's anti-Islamic State campaign was its most proficient [counterterrorism] operation since the end of the 1975–1990 civil war, and it demonstrated the extent of its improved capabilities since its last major counterterrorism engagement in 2007 against a Sunni jihadi group in north Lebanon" (Nicholas Blanford, "The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah's Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 8, September 2017, p. 30). For a positive assessment of the Jordanian Armed Forces' contribution to counterterrorism, see Hardin Lang, William Wechsler, and Alia Awadallah, *The Future of U.S.-Jordanian Counterterrorism Cooperation*, Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, November 30, 2017.

5 Kenneth M. Pollack, "The U.S. Has Wasted Billions of Dollars on Failed Arab Armies," *Foreign Policy*, January 31, 2019b.

6 The World Bank's Human Capital Index provides a cross-national measure of human capital. According to its 2018 data, Oman has the third-highest human capital of any Arab country, trailing only Bahrain and the UAE (World Bank, "Human Capital Project: Human Capital Index," data set, 2018). According to the World Bank's 2018 data, the UAE is the second-most-diversified economy of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, with 70 percent of its GDP derived from nonoil sectors. Only Bahrain is less dependent on oil, although its economy is one-tenth of the size of the UAE's. See Antonio M. Ollero, Sahar Sajjad Hussain, Sona Varma, Grzegorz

stable Middle East, reducing the burden on the United States to intervene militarily and reducing the sources of threats that can directly harm the U.S. homeland.

Partnership Challenges and Mitigation Measures

Although partnerships in the region hold promise, they also come with potential downsides. Perhaps the most pervasive of these downsides is the *reputational risk* that comes with supporting foreign governments that are not operating in a manner that is consistent with U.S. values, or at times, U.S. strategic goals. According to Freedom House scoring, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is the least-free region in the world, with two-thirds of its countries—encompassing 83 percent of the region's people—categorized as "not free."[7] The only other region in the world that approaches this lack of freedom is Eurasia. On a percentage basis, sub-Saharan Africans are nine times more likely to be living in a free society than citizens of the MENA region.

From a practical standpoint, this means that the United States has very few options to enter into partnerships in the MENA region with governments that share American values related to political and human rights. Lacking these opportunities, the United States has three logical pathways to mitigate the reputational risk of its partnerships with MENA states. The first is to limit the scope of the partnership so as not to tie the United States to the practices of these partners—particularly the most authoritarian among them. The second is to condition aspects of the bilateral relationship on respect for basic rights. And the third is to invest in good governance to support those partners willing to reform. None of these approaches would be cost-free in that each could lead MENA partners to pursue deeper relationships with other countries, including those that the United States considers global or regional adversaries, and could lead partners to be less cooperative with U.S. initiatives. However, these approaches have the advantage of limiting the U.S. reputational costs that come with the perception of Washington prioritizing other considerations (e.g., U.S. military access and basing) over U.S. values as a supporter of political, economic, and human rights.

The second risk of partnerships is that U.S. support for regional states could lead to *entrapment*, in which partners drag the United States into regional conflicts. This risk is most acute with respect to Iran contingencies, whereby a regional partner (e.g., Israel) could take measures against Iran, such as preemptive attacks on its nuclear facilities, after which the United States might feel compelled to enter the conflict on the

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Peszko, and Helena Munir Freih Al-Naber, *Gulf Economic Update: Economic Diversification for a Sustainable and Resilient GCC*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, December 5, 2019.

[7] Sarah Repucci, *Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*, Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2020.

side of its partner.[8] A second type of entrapment might not pull the United States into a regional war in a direct combat role, but instead in an enabling role through the provision of noncombat support (e.g., aerial refueling) and arms sales, as occurred in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. In theory, the risk of entrapment should be lower in the MENA region than in other regions because the United States has only one formal ally in the region with which it has explicitly entered into a collective self-defense pact—the U.S. NATO Article 5 commitments to Turkey.[9] However, the U.S. special relationship with Israel and precedent of defending the GCC states and Gulf maritime security (Tanker War, 1990–1991 Gulf War) suggest that entrapment is a genuine risk.

The logical mitigation measure to avoid entrapment is to differentiate general U.S. support for a partner from specific U.S. support for military activities the partner might undertake. This, for example, means that the United States would need to be willing to actively oppose an uncoordinated Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear infrastructure or the UAE equipping southern secessionists in Yemen who work against preserving a unified state.[10] It also means that despite the potential economic benefits of arms sales, the United States needs to fully price in the risk of potential end-use violations, diversion of weapons through instability, and the reputational costs associated with backing combatants who lack broad international support.

The third and final principal risk of Middle East partnerships is that U.S. partners will *free-ride* on American security guarantees, underinvesting in their defense capabilities based on the assumption that these costs can be passed on to the United States. In an era when U.S. political leaders and defense planners are focused on prioritizing resources for near-peer competition, this would seem to be a major concern in the Middle East. That said, the challenge is less one of free-riding in terms of financial outlays than defense investments not translating into real capabilities supporting national strategies that allow the United States to shift its resources elsewhere. According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Saudi Arabia is now the third-largest defense spender in the world and devotes nearly 10 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP)—three times more than the United States per the

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[8] Daniel Sobelman, "Restraining an Ally: Israel, the United States, and Iran's Nuclear Program, 2011–2012," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4, August 2018.

[9] Even in this case, many analysts do not interpret the Article 5 commitment as likely to be invoked or upheld for certain contingencies. See Michael Moran, "Turkey's Article 5 Argument Finds No Takers," Carnegie Corporation, February 24, 2016.

[10] The United States expressly supports a unified Yemeni state. According to the statement of the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa, "The U.S. supports United Nations and Coalition partner efforts to achieve a permanent cessation of hostilities among the parties and a negotiated, inclusive settlement that leads to a unified, representative government led by the legitimate Republic of Yemen Government" (U.S. Embassy in Yemen, "Our Relationship," webpage, undated).

size of its economy—to defense.[11] The challenge for the United States is that, despite this spending, Saudi Arabia remains highly dependent on the United States for its defense.[12] The logical mitigation measure for this challenge is continuing the process of better linking partner acquisitions, training, and defense reform to real-world military contingencies, including less glamorous missions, such as improved border security. It would also require delinking Washington's approach to reassurance from the transfer of prestige equipment that might have limited applications, or which possess an application that is offensive in nature. This would suggest, for example, more scrutiny of big-ticket items like advanced stealth aircraft to regional partners, such as the UAE.

Past Experience Prioritizing Among Partners

The U.S. historical experience managing Middle East partnerships was shaped by Cold War rivalries. Washington became an important actor in the Middle East at the end of the Second World War, but it did not eclipse the United Kingdom as the most-important Western power in the region until the United Kingdom withdrew "east of the Suez," a process that was announced by London in the late 1960s and then executed in 1971.[13] As the United States stepped into the vacuum, it became the dominant extra-regional power in the Middle East during a time of heightened competition with Moscow. Although a Cold War mindset led the United States to be overly reductionist in its assessment of the region, the influence of Moscow was real. The Soviet Union was the preferred patron in Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and South Yemen, and there were fears that Soviet influence would expand, given the appeal of communism's "anti-imperialist" rhetoric among the region's postcolonial leaders.

Managing partnerships with Middle East states was an important aspect of the new U.S. role. Although Washington was expected to succeed the United Kingdom as the Western standard-bearer, this was a period when the United States was retrenching from foreign military deployments in reaction to the experience of the Vietnam War. So to fulfill the leadership vacuum created by the United Kingdom's departure, Washington's initial preference was to work through regional powers to advance its interests rather than taking on a large forward posture. To operationalize this strategy, Iran

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[11] Pieter D. Wezeman and Alexandra Kuimova, *Military Spending and Arms Imports by Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE*, Solna, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Fact Sheet, May 2019.

[12] Anthony H. Cordesman and Nicholas Harrington, *The Arab Gulf States and Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, and the Shifting Military Balance*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, working paper, December 12, 2018.

[13] Henry A. Kissinger, "Policy Toward the Persian Gulf," memorandum to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Treasury, and Director, Central Intelligence, Washington, D.C., No. 66, July 12, 1969.

and Saudi Arabia were designated by the administration of Richard Nixon as "twin pillars." Iran's was judged as the most formidable military in the region, and its pro-Western orientation under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi made it a natural choice as a favored regional partner.[14] Saudi Arabia, which was still relatively underdeveloped despite its natural resource endowments, was seen as an important nod to the region's ethnic majority. And although it was not an official "pillar," Israel was cultivated as another capable regional power that the West could work through to challenge Soviet influence. That Washington perceived these regional heavyweights as a way to spare the United States the cost of maintaining a security umbrella is embodied in American policymakers' description of them as "chosen instruments."[15]

The initial returns on the strategy were favorable. The United States avoided a large-scale military commitment while effectively competing with the Soviet Union. Initially, the monarchies the United States relied on (the Pahlavi and Sa'ud dynasties) endured. And when Soviet military advisers wore out their welcome in Cairo, it created an opportunity for Washington to peel Egypt from the Soviet sphere while also normalizing relations between the most militarily capable "frontline" Arab state (i.e., Egypt) and Israel. However, the United States' relatively smooth ascent as the dominant extra-regional power in the Middle East was disrupted in 1979, when its partner in Tehran was overthrown by a popular revolution and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, raising the specter of further territorial advances that would threaten the Persian Gulf.[16]

In response, President Jimmy Carter's administration declared the intent to deploy military force to protect U.S. interests in the region while standing up the predecessor to U.S. Central Command to oversee the United States' bolstered forward presence.[17] The new orientation reverberated in U.S. partnerships as basing and access became increasingly important considerations in Washington's calculus. To carry out the Carter doctrine, the United States needed to deepen its partnerships, particularly with the Arab Gulf states, and further build out the basing infrastructure to host U.S. forces. As for adhering to Washington's declared intent to intervene militarily to blunt threats to its regional interests, in the ensuing decade this was limited to relatively small-scale interventions, such as U.S. involvement in Lebanon (1982–1984) and

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14 Richard McGarrah Helms, *Iran's International Position*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Intelligence Board, Special National Intelligence Estimate 34-70, September 3, 1970.

15 Stephen McGlinchey, "Richard Nixon's Road to Tehran: The Making of the U.S.-Iran Arms Agreement of May 1972," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 37, No. 4, September 2013, p. 846.

16 For an assessment made at the time of these events, see Francis Fukuyama, *The Soviet Threat to the Persian Gulf*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, P-6596, 1981.

17 Jimmy Carter, *The State of the Union Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress*, Washington, D.C., January 23, 1980.

prosecuting of the Tanker War (1987–1988).[18] Although competition with the Soviet Union was the broader logic driving U.S. partnership choices and decisions around interventions, what actually led to U.S. military involvement were regional conflicts (Israel-Palestine and Iraq-Iran). This was an early lesson that treating the Middle East as a microcosm of the Cold War risked leaving Washington unprepared for addressing the region's deeper issues.

As the Cold War ended, Washington lacked a defining logic for its alignment choices. Its overwhelming victory in the 1990–1991 Gulf War only reinforced views that direct U.S. military power was necessary to protect the sovereignty of weak but oil-rich Gulf states that did not have the capacity to defend themselves. With international threats receding, the United States instead focused on the dual containment of two regional powers that threatened their neighbors—Iran and Iraq. Although the principal threats that motivated U.S. action evolved, Washington's prioritization of partners remained broadly similar. If anything, this transitional period only reinforced the trend of investing in partnerships with the GCC states. The United States viewed these states as important for containing both Iran and Iraq, particularly because they inhabited the geography necessary for sustaining U.S. military presence in the region and surging forces in the event of a contingency. Moreover, these states were major producers of the energy resources that Western economies depended on, and although they had not normalized relations with Israel, they were not an imminent military threat to it.[19]

Just as the previous U.S. strategy was upended by events, so too was dual containment superseded by 9/11 and the 2003 Iraq War. In a decision many analysts and policymakers now lament as a major U.S. strategic error,[20] the United States altered the regional balance of power and likely amplified sectarian tensions by removing the Saddam Hussein regime. The United States was left facing myriad threats from non-state actors, but the decision winnowed down its primary regional state adversaries to

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[18] The United States intervened in Lebanon as part of a coalition that included, at different points in time, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. The mission evolved over time given major changes in context, including the assassination of Lebanon's President Bachir Gemayel, but can generally be understood as a stabilization operation that stemmed from external involvement in Lebanon, including Israel's desire to expel the Palestine Liberation Organization. The U.S. intervention in the Tanker War began with a reflagging and escort of vessels in the Persian Gulf. It escalated, culminating in a direct military confrontation between the United States and Iran that included the mining of U.S. ships and the U.S. destruction of Iranian oil platforms and ships. It also included several inadvertent escalations, such as Iraq hitting the USS *Stark* with equipment (a fighter jet and missiles) acquired from France and the United States mistakenly shooting down an Iranian civilian jet.

[19] Ties between the Arab Gulf states and Israel grew considerably following the Madrid peace conference and Oslo process, leading to the opening of trade offices and economic ties. See Dalia Dassa Kaye, *Beyond the Handshake: Multilateral Cooperation in the Arab-Israeli Peace Process: 1991-1996*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

[20] Michael J. Mazarr, *Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America's Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy*, New York: Hachette, 2019; Wehrey et al., 2010.

one—Iran—with Tehran figuring ever more prominently in the logic behind U.S. partnerships.

In an echo of the binary logic of the Cold War, policymakers referred to the "axis" led by Iran and the "moderate Arab states" Washington relied on to contain that threat.[21] The terms were catchy but misleading. Iran's "axis" consisted only of Syria, Hizballah, Hamas, and smaller nonstate actors of minimal import. As for the "moderate Arab states," several were immoderate by objective standards,[22] with Saudi Arabia remaining the pivotal U.S. partner in the Gulf. Once again, Washington's threat perceptions—the need to secure energy supplies for itself and its allies and the desire to bolster Israel's security—appeared to be the primary factors explaining its priority partnerships.

Under the Obama administration, more attention was devoted to human rights considerations and aid conditionality was employed in an effort to influence the inclusivity of Egypt, a priority U.S. partner. However, the administration's attempts to reform U.S. relationships with partners was hampered by developments including the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the emergence of ISIS. Specifically, these events pushed the administration to adopt some of the stability-versus-reform trade-offs associated with traditional U.S. policy and held back Obama's efforts to reduce the attention the region received relative to other strategic priorities. For example, concerns about U.S. military access in the Gulf led the administration to exert minimal pressure to stop the Khalifa monarchy from putting down the uprising in Bahrain, just as ISIS's emergence in Iraq and Syria forced another military intervention, albeit one that was much more narrowly scoped and much more successful than prior efforts.

Themes of U.S. Partnerships in the Middle East

Looking back over how the United States selected and cultivated partners since it became the dominant Western power in the Middle East, we can identify several themes. The first is the tendency to default to threatism, as described in Chapter One. Despite significant change over time in what was judged by policymakers as constituting the primary threat to U.S. interests, Washington has tended to invest in partnerships that are useful for managing principal threats (e.g., Soviet influence, Arab threats to Israeli security, Iranian and Iraqi expansion). Because a variety of states might have

[21] According to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, "You really do have a struggle between extremism and moderation . . . with on the one side Hezbollah and Hamas and the Palestinian territories backed by Iran with the kind of sidekick of Syria, and then on the other hand moderate Arab states" ("Transcript: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice with the New York Post Editorial Board," *New York Times*, September 26, 2006).

[22] See F. Gregory Gause, III's, characterization of Saudi Arabia's closest ideological offshoots (F. Gregory Gause, III, "Saudi Arabia and Regional Leadership: The Impossibility of Hegemony," *Middle East Insights*, National University of Singapore and Middle East Institute of Singapore, No. 243, August 25, 2020).

utility in those endeavors, particularly when the threat is as expansive as containing a rival ideology, the United States has cultivated partnerships broadly, removing states as potential partners only if they failed to uphold the principal concern of maintaining the U.S. position in the regional security order.

The second theme is that partnerships appear, at times, to have drifted into an end in and of themselves rather than a means to realize strategic objectives. That can be seen in the way that partners working at cross-purposes with U.S. interests have not led Washington to substantially revise the underlying relationship. For example, Saudi Arabia was part of the 1973 oil embargo, initially shunned Egypt for normalizing relations with Israel, managed state-society relations in a way that led to 19 of the 9/11 hijackers to hail of Saudi descent, has consistently been one of the largest contributors of foreign fighters to conflicts around the world (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq [2003], Iraq and Syria [2014]),[23] requested the removal of U.S. combat forces from its territory in 2003 (including a crucial U.S. Air Force contingent at Prince Sultan Airbase),[24] struck targets in Yemen that were identified as part of the "no target list,"[25] and allegedly murdered a Saudi dissident with U.S. residence.[26] To be sure, those activities have led many Americans to have conflicted or outright negative opinions of the Kingdom,[27] but they have not to date altered the fundamental state-to-state relationship between the two countries.

Third, the risk of internal instability, to include the popular overthrow of partner regimes, does not appear to be a major consideration in U.S. investments in partnerships. The United States lost a high-priority partner through this pathway (the Shah's Iran), incurred disruptions in another (Hosni Mubarak's Egypt), and risked such an outcome in 2011 in Bahrain. In other cases, the threat of internal unrest has operated as a check on levels of cooperation with the United States. For example, domestic opposition in Jordan to the 1990–1991 Gulf War contributed to the Hashemite King-

[23] For estimates of the Saudi foreign fighter contingents in the various conflicts referenced, see R. Kim Cragin, "The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 33, No. 3, August 2017; Karmen Erjavec, "The 'Bosnian War on Terrorism,'" *Journal of Language and Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2009; Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records*, West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy, January 2, 2007; and Mohammed M. Hafez, "Jihad After Iraq," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 1, No. 4, March 2008.

[24] Sharon Otterman, "Saudi Arabia: Withdrawal of U.S. Forces," Council on Foreign Relations, February 7, 2005.

[25] Stephanie Nebehay, "Saudi Arabia Admits Coalition 'Mistakes' in Targeting in Yemen," Reuters, October 1, 2018.

[26] Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Death Sentences in Khashoggi Killing Fail to Dispel Questions," *New York Times*, December 23, 2019.

[27] According to a February 2020 Gallup poll, 65 percent of Americans have an unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of Saudi Arabia compared with 34 percent who have a favorable or very favorable opinion (Gallup, "Country Ratings," poll, February 2020; Justin McCarthy, "Iran, North Korea Liked Least by Americans," Gallup, March 3, 2020).

dom remaining neutral in the conflict. Saudi public opposition to U.S. force presence facilitated the departure of U.S. combat forces in 2003. Uncertainty in the durability of the partner government and uncertainty in the partner's ability to deliver cooperation with Washington in the face of domestic backlash operate as limiting factors on Washington's expected return on investment. However, such downsides do not always appear to be factored into the scope or type of partnerships the United States maintains in the region.

Current Prioritization of Partners

Today, there is substantial continuity in how the United States prioritizes among its Middle East partnerships. The continuity is based on three enduring principles. The first is that for successive American administrations, partnerships are perceived as necessary to contain a principal adversary. During the Cold War, the adversary was the Soviet Union; today, it is Iran. However, only a few of these Middle East partnerships are genuinely considered to be counterweights capable of pushing back against Iranian influence. Israel, with which the United States is believed to have coordinated cyberattacks against Iranian nuclear infrastructure,[28] is the state viewed as a militarily capable asset against Iran. More commonly, strong partnerships are thought of as denying Iran fertile territory for advancing its regional agenda. This logic is applied to present-day Iraq and Lebanon, for example.[29] The idea is not that these states will actively blunt security challenges presented by Iran, but that strong U.S. partnerships with them can prevent their defection to Iran (see Table 2.1). In this way, these partnerships are very much an echo of Cold War logic.

The second principle driving continuity is the privileged place of Israel within U.S. partnerships in the Middle East. That Israel stands apart—and ahead—of other partners is most clearly conveyed in the Ronald Reagan–era policy (which continues today) committing the United States to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge (QME).[30] This policy means that the collective military capabilities the United States provides to Arab states may not exceed the capabilities provided to Israel. The United

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[28] David E. Sanger, "Obama Order Sped Up Wave of Cyberattacks Against Iran," *New York Times*, June 1, 2012; David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt, and Ronen Bergman, "Long-Planned and Bigger Than Thought: Strike on Iran's Nuclear Program," *New York Times*, July 10, 2020.

[29] Bilal Y. Saab, "The United States Has Not Lost Lebanon," *Foreign Policy*, May 8, 2018; Ian Talley and Gordon Lubold, "The Real Danger in Qatar-Gulf Feud Is Iran, U.S. Officials Say," *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2018.

[30] For more on President Reagan's role in QME, see Bernard Gwertzman, "Reagan Says U.S. Has Not Altered Policy on Israel," *New York Times*, February 17, 1982. For a general overview of QME that attributes its origins earlier based on the implicit adoption of QME by the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, see William Wunderle and Andre Briere, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Israel's Qualitative Military Edge: The Need for a Common Vision*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 80, January 24, 2008.

Table 2.1
Iran Framing in U.S. Integrated Country Strategies for Iraq and Lebanon

Country	Strategy Framing
Iraq	"Iraq will remain a critical foreign policy priority for the United States over the next four years as we seek to help Iraq chart a security and foreign policy path separate from that of Iran or other neighbors."
Lebanon	"Lebanon is at the forefront of U.S. efforts to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and counter Iran's expanding influence in the Middle East."

SOURCES: U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Lebanon*, Washington, D.C., August 9, 2018c, p. 2; U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Iraq*, Washington, D.C., August 13, 2018d, p. 2.

States QME policy is a signal that Washington prioritizes the security of Israel over that of other partners. The United States takes this calculus a step further by rewarding those Arab states that have normalized relations with Israel, entrusting them with more-advanced equipment after they end hostilities with its most pivotal Middle East partner. Indeed, the UAE's efforts to translate its recent steps to normalize relations with Israel, presumably in return for acquiring lethal drones, electronic warfare aircraft, and potentially becoming the first Arab country to acquire the F-35 fifth-generation fighter,[31] are just the latest example.

The third aspect of continuity is the enduring importance—which has only increased in recent decades—of the Arab Gulf states as U.S. partners. Washington's initial interest in these countries was driven by their crucial role as energy providers. But their rising importance, which runs opposite to the trend in U.S. dependence on foreign energy,[32] is explained by their position as frontline states in U.S. efforts to contain Iran. Finally, because they have the financial means to pay for arms transfers and to shoulder other costs, such as building out basing infrastructure, Arab Gulf states can be financial contributors to the mission.

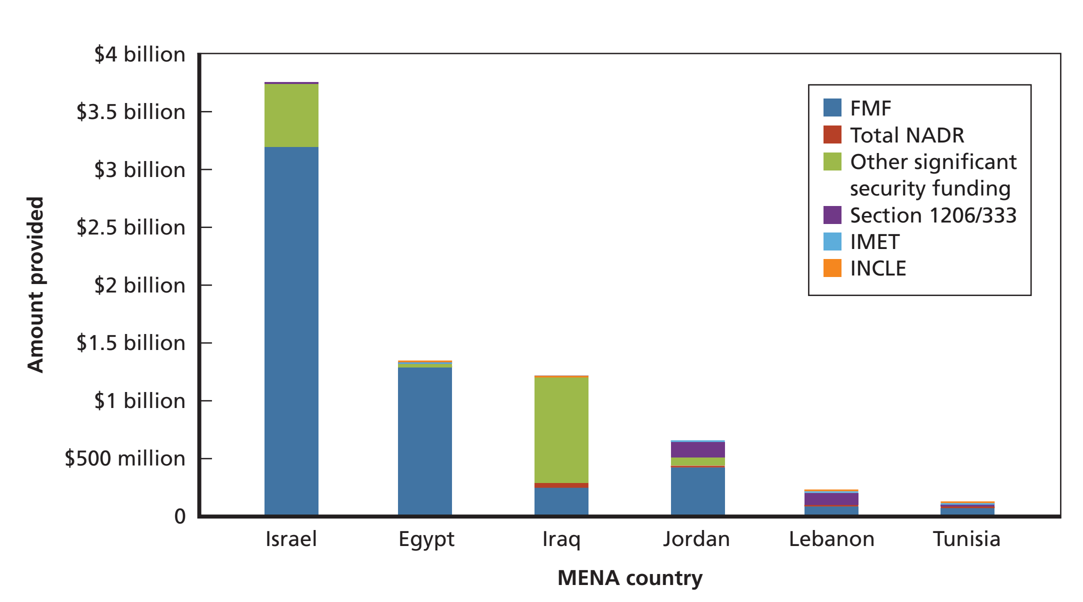
Figures 2.1 and 2.2 and Table 2.2 present the security dimension of U.S. engagement with Middle East partners. (A fuller accounting of the data depicted in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 is available in Table A.1 in Appendix A). The metrics displayed in the figures and table can be used to consider the depth of ties between the United States and these partners. The figures depict security funding provided to recipients in the form of grants and sales. Figure 2.1 shows grants to recipients receiving an average of more than $100 million annually from fiscal year (FY) 2016 to FY 2020. Figure 2.2 depicts recipients of U.S. weapons grants or sales averaging more than $1 billion annu-

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[31] Mark Mazzetti and Edward Wong, "Trump Administration Pushes Arms Sale to U.A.E. Despite Israeli Worries," *New York Times*, August 19, 2020; Mark Mazzetti, Edward Wong, and Michael LaForgia, "Netanyahu Privately Condoned U.S. Plan to Sell Arms to U.A.E., Officials Say," *New York Times*, September 3, 2020.

[32] Bradley Olson, "U.S. Becomes Net Exporter of Oil, Fuels for First Time in Decades," *Wall Street Journal*, December 6, 2018.

Figure 2.1
Top MENA Recipients of U.S. Security Assistance as Grants (Annual Average from FY 2016 to FY 2020)



SOURCES: Data are from Security Assistance Monitor, "Security Assistance Database," data files on U.S. security assistance to MENA countries, FY 2016–FY 2021, undated; and Jeremy M. Sharp, Carla E. Humud, and Sarah R. Collins, *U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical Background, Recent Trends, and the FY2021 Request*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R46344, May 5, 2020.
NOTES: The Section 1206/333 five-year average was calculated using FY 2016–FY 2020 data because Security Assistance Monitor did not provide FY 2021 appropriations for this security cooperation program at the time of writing. FMF = foreign military financing. IMET = International Military Education and Training. INCLE = International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement. NADR = Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining and Related Programs.

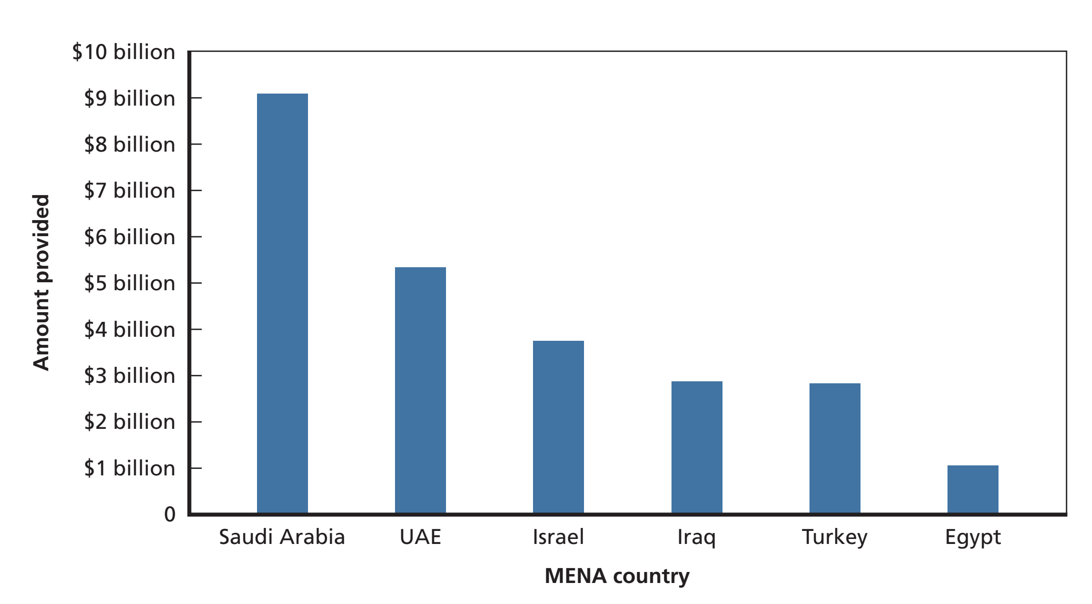
ally from 2015 to 2017. Table 2.2 presents qualitative indicators of U.S. prioritization of partners.

Beginning with FMF, which is the primary mechanism by which the United States has provided military grants to Middle East partners, there is a clear connection between these grants and settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The three primary recipients of these funds have historically been Israel and the two Arab states that first made peace with Israel—Egypt and Jordan. More-recent recipients of significant FMF have been Iraq and, to lesser extents, Lebanon and Tunisia. The addition of these latter recipients reflects some modest adaptation of the funding account, but ultimately, FMF remains a reward for Arab-Israeli peace. Indeed, of the just more than $6 billion in FMF apportioned globally in 2019, 81 percent of funding went to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan.[33] Although this formula perhaps made more sense during the period when

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[33] This figure (81 percent) is based on FMF data presented in Security Assistance Monitor, undated, in which Egypt received $1.3 billion, Jordan received $425 million, and Israel received $3.3 billion in FMF of a total global

Figure 2.2
Top MENA Recipients of U.S. Weapons Transfers (Annual Average, 2015–2017)



SOURCE: U.S. Department of State, "World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers (WMEAT) 2019," Table III, data set, December 2019c.
NOTE: Dollar amounts shown reflect a three-year average from 2015 to 2017, the most-recent data reported by the U.S. Department of State. Dollar amounts for Israel and Egypt almost exclusively reflect FMF weapons transfers. Dollar amounts for Iraq and Turkey reflect a mixture of weapons transfer programs; however, foreign military sales (FMS) account for the vast majority of weapons transfers to Turkey. Dollar amounts for Saudi Arabia and the UAE exclusively reflect FMS.

Egypt and Jordan initially concluded their peace agreements with Israel, this logic appears ill suited to today's context, when Arab states have incentives to normalize relations with Israel even without a financial payout from Washington. Indeed, Israel has strengthened its bilateral cooperation with Egypt because of concerns about terrorism in the Sinai and shared interests in containing the influence of Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.[34] U.S. financial incentives are no longer critical to maintaining this relationship, which is now sustained by these states' own self-interests.

The second large mechanism for arms transfers is FMS, although, as is clear from its name, FMS is not a taxpayer grant to recipients but a sale between U.S. defense contractors and foreign governments, with the U.S. government acting as an intermediary that approves the transfer based on U.S. State Department notification and contingent on congressional review and approval. Whether FMS is measured by notifications—which are best understood as the upper bound of the sale—or deliveries, Saudi Arabia operates on a different plane than the rest of the Middle East,

outlay of just less than $6.2 billion.

34 Moran Stern, "The Reality of Israel-Egypt Relations," Atlantic Council blog, October 28, 2016.

Table 2.2
Qualitative Measures of U.S. Security Relationships with Partners

Country	Geographic or Component Command Headquarters?	Two Thousand or More U.S. Forces Deployed?	Hosts Airbases Used for Strikes against ISIS?	Treaty Ally with Shared Defense?	Designated Major Non-NATO Ally?	Has United States Agreed to Sell F-35 or THAAD?	Combat Participant in D-ISIS Coalition?
Algeria	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Bahrain	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Egypt	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Iraq	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Israel	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Jordan	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Kuwait	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Lebanon	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Libya (GNA)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Morocco	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Oman	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Qatar	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Saudi Arabia	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Tunisia	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Turkey	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes[a]	Yes
UAE	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes

Table 2.2—Continued

Country	Geographic or Component Command Headquarters?	Two Thousand or More U.S. Forces Deployed?	Hosts Airbases Used for Strikes against ISIS?	Treaty Ally with Shared Defense?	Designated Major Non-NATO Ally?	Has United States Agreed to Sell F-35 or THAAD?	Combat Participant in D-ISIS Coalition?
Yemen (ROYG)	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

SOURCES: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020, pp. 28–63; "Moroccan F-16 Carry Out Airstrikes Against ISIS," *Morocco World News*, December 10, 2014; Security Assistance Monitor, undated; Sharp, Humud, and Collins, 2020; *U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs—Fiscal Year 2017*, Washington, D.C., February 9, 2016a; U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs—Fiscal Year 2018*, Washington, D.C., February 2017a; U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs—Fiscal Year 2019*, Washington, D.C., February 12, 2018b; U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs—Fiscal Year 2020*, Washington, D.C., March 11, 2019a; U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs—Fiscal Year 2021*, Washington, D.C., February 10, 2020b.

NOTES: GNA = Government of National Accord. ROYG = Republic of Yemen Government. THAAD = Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System. D-ISIS = defeat ISIS.

[a] The sale of F-35s to Turkey is on hold because of Turkish purchase of air defense systems from Russia.

although Iraq, Turkey, and the UAE are also significant purchasers of U.S. armaments. The main takeaway is that the Arab Gulf states, Iraq, and Turkey—like frontline states in the Arab-Israeli conflict, whose privileged position in the hierarchy of U.S. partners is indicated by their receipt of FMF—also enjoy elevated status in Washington's prioritization of partners, as indicated by their receipt of U.S. arms through FMS.[35] An important caveat, however, is that analysts need to differentiate in scale between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on one hand, and the rest of their counterparts among the GCC states on the other. According to U.S. State Department data, the Kingdom spent more than $27 billion on U.S. arms imports over the last three years for which data was available (2015–2017) and the UAE spent $16 billion. No other GCC state purchased as much as $2.5 billion in U.S. arms over the same period.[36]

Proponents of this approach argue that U.S. arms sales benefit the American economy and also tie partners to American equipment, creating sunk costs that make it harder for partners to pivot to an extra-regional competitor, such as Russia or China. Explicitly linking arms sales to U.S. economic security initially was introduced during the Clinton administration,[37] but became a particular focus of the Trump administration, which issued new policy guidance on conventional arms transfers. The administration noted "the executive branch shall account for . . . the transfer's financial or economic effect on United States industry and its effect on the defense industrial base, including contributions to United States manufacturing and innovation."[38] A point of emphasis under Trump was the contribution of arms sales to sustaining and creating American jobs, with the Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs noting "[u]p to 1 million people across our nation rely on U.S. defense exports for their jobs."[39]

Although it is true that U.S. defense manufacturers have acquired the largest share of global arms sales, some argue that the economic benefit of this trade is more modest than might be anticipated, given the relatively small size of the sector compared with that of other industries.[40] A political scientist with senior government experience in the defense industrial base finds that the data are insufficient to determine the potential

[35] To be clear, the countries entering into FMS agreements (e.g., Saudi Arabia) with the United States do not view FMS as a favor or privilege. These states view FMS as a financial contribution to their defense and support for the U.S. economy.

[36] U.S. Department of State, 2019c, Table III.

[37] A. Trevor Thrall and Caroline Dorminey, *Risky Business: The Role of Arms Sales in U.S. Foreign Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, Policy Analysis No. 836, March 13, 2018.

[38] The White House, "National Security Presidential Memorandum Regarding U.S. Conventional Arms Transfer Policy," presidential memorandum, April 19, 2018a.

[39] Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. Arms Sales and Defense Trade," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, fact sheet, July 27, 2020.

[40] Jonathan Caverley, "America's Arms Sales Policy: Security Abroad, Not Jobs at Home," *War on the Rock*s, April 6, 2018.

for arms sales to significantly increase U.S. economic security.[41] Although the scale of the economic benefit remains disputed, there are clear security and reputational costs associated with current U.S. arms sales, of which Middle Eastern states are the largest purchasers globally. For example, a study from the Cato Institute finds that the largest share of U.S. arms sales are actually to states that score in the "highest risk" and "very risky" categories based on their fragility, quality of governance, and involvement in internal and external conflict.[42] When the United States sells arms to these recipients, it shoulders some of the downside risk that the recipient will use the weapons in a manner that is inconsistent with American interests and international norms, including that the arms could be diverted to adversaries and that both the publics affected by the conflict and the international community will see the arms sales as inconsistent with U.S. professed values.

A third important takeaway from the security assistance and sales data is how little of the funding is specifically linked to the overall objective of regional stability and to two priority American interests—counterterrorism and nonproliferation. Most of the funding can be used for the general development of partner state's conventional militaries. There are, however, some promising trends in the use of Section 333 (formerly Section 1206) funds,[43] which are intended for the purpose of building partner capacity and which, in recent years, have seen their largest MENA allocations go to Lebanon and Jordan for initiatives linked to preventing spillover violence from neighboring conflicts and bolstering these countries' ability to conduct counterterrorism operations. In Chapter Five, we discuss further how the United States employs these funding mechanisms.

The qualitative observations shown in Figure 2.2 reveal variation in how the United States prioritizes its security relationships in the region and how MENA countries provide military access and contribute to U.S. national security priorities. All of the U.S. geographic and component command forward headquarters for U.S. Central Command are in the Gulf (CENTCOM, U.S. Air Forces Central [AFCENT], U.S. Army Central [ARCENT], Marine Corps Forces Central Command [MARCENT], U.S. Naval Forces Central Command [NAVCENT], and Special Operations Command Central [SOCCENT]), which underscores the importance of basing in the GCC states. The United States also has more than 2,000 forces forward deployed in five of the six GCC countries—with Oman being the only exception. Similarly, the GCC countries—along with Jordan and Turkey—played a critical role as the launch-

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41 Eugene Gholz, "Conventional Arms Transfers and U.S. Economic Security," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Spring 2019.

42 Thrall and Dorminey, 2018.

43 U.S. Code, Title 10, Ch. 16, Security Cooperation, Section 333, Foreign Security Forces: Authority to Build Capacity.

ing point of airstrikes against ISIS. And several of these states contributed their own air power to the military campaign to defeat ISIS.

The United States has bestowed additional benefits on these partners. Bahrain and Kuwait are designated as major non-NATO allies. And the two most important partners in this region—Saudi Arabia and the UAE—receive high-end military technology, including the THAAD, that only a few select U.S. partners, such as South Korea, field.

Risks of Current Prioritization

If the United States' ultimate objective is to support regional stability in a way that can transform its engagement with the Middle East into an opportunity to strengthen U.S. national security and contribute to shared prosperity rather than a drag on U.S. resources and reputation, Washington will need to fully internalize the risks of its current prioritization of Middle East partnerships. There are three principal risks—terrorism, proxy war, and internal unrest—that can be scored relative to U.S. partnerships with specific countries. We present indicators of these risks in Tables 2.3, 2.4, and 2.5, respectively.

Terrorism Risks

The first risk is that the current U.S. approach is not effective in limiting the incidence of terrorism, including the types of terrorist threats that could once again menace the homeland. Priority recipients of U.S. assistance, such as Egypt, have fared poorly in addressing terrorist threats. Between 2015 and 2019, Egypt suffered an average of 182 terrorist attacks per year, trailing only Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Turkey. This is particularly troubling in Egypt's case because the main group it combats, a Sinai-based Islamic State franchise, has characteristics that suggest its potential as a future homeland security threat. The Sinai State's killing of an American citizen[44]—albeit occurring prior to the past five years—and its downing of a Russian civilian airliner imply an intent and capability to sponsor attacks on foreign targets.

Despite some modest reform of security cooperation with Cairo by Washington under the Obama administration, including efforts to better link assistance to missions that the United States and Egypt have a shared interest in executing,[45] the nature of U.S. assistance provided to Egypt is not well suited to counterterrorism.[46] Historically,

[44] Rukmini Callimachi, "Egypt: Islamic State Allies Say They Killed an American Worker," *New York Times*, November 30, 2014.

[45] Tamara Cofman Wittes, "Obama Administration to Sissi: Egypt-Bound Weapons Released with Caveat," Brookings Institution blog, April 6, 2015.

[46] William D. Hartung and Seth Binder, *U.S. Security Assistance to Egypt: Examining the Return on Investment*, Washington, D.C.: Project on Middle East Democracy and Center for International Policy, May 5, 2020.

Table 2.3
Terrorism Risk Indicators

Country	Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) Operating in Country	Number of Terror Attacks on Partner's Soil, 5-Year Average[a]	Estimated Number of Foreign Fighters to Iraq and Syria	Terror Attack or Reported Plotting Against U.S. Homeland	Lethal Terrorist Attack on U.S. Citizen Within Past Five Years?
Algeria	AQIM; ISGS; AL-Murabitoun	19	87–278	No	No
Bahrain	Al-Ashtar Brigades	5	100	No	No
Egypt	ISIS-Sinai, Gama'a Al-Islamiyya	182	600	No	No
Iraq	ISIS, KH, Asa'ib Ahl la-Haqq, Ansar Al-Islam, JRTN, PKK	2,353	N/A	No	Yes
Israel	Hamas, PLF, PIJ, PFLP, PFLP-GC, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Jaysh Al-Islam, MSC	85	60	No	Yes
Jordan		5	3,000–3,950	No	Yes
Kuwait		> 1	150	Yes[b]	No
Lebanon	Hizballah, Asbat Al-Ansar, Abdullah Azzam Brigades	57	900	No	No
Libya	ISIS-Libya, Ansar Al-Shari'a-Libya, AQIM	253	600	No	No
Morocco		1	1,699	No	No
Oman		0	0	No	No
Qatar		0	10	No	No
Saudi Arabia	AQAP	83	3,244	Yes	No
Tunisia	Ansar Al-Shari'a-Tunisia, AQIM	39	4,000	No	No
Turkey	PKK	354	3,000	No	No[c]
UAE		0	15	No	No

Table 2.3—Continued

Country	Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) Operating in Country	Number of Terror Attacks on Partner's Soil, 5-Year Average[a]	Estimated Number of Foreign Fighters to Iraq and Syria	Terror Attack or Reported Plotting Against U.S. Homeland	Lethal Terrorist Attack on U.S. Citizen Within Past Five Years?
Yemen	AQAP, ISIS-Yemen	1,032	110	Yes	Yes

SOURCES: The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, "Disaggregated Data Collection, Analysis, and Crisis Mapping Platform," data file on fatal incidents in MENA countries, July 2015–July 2020, undated; Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?" Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper 22190, April 2016; Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora': Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State*, London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2018; Richard Engel, "Turkey Attack: American Survivor Jake Raak Played Dead, Stayed Silent," *NBC News*, January 2, 2017; Diaa Hadid, "American Graduate Student Killed in Stabbing Rampage Near Tel Aviv," *New York Times*, March 8, 2016; Amanda Holpuch and Alan Yuhas, "Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez: Everything We Know About the Chattanooga Gunman," *The Guardian*, July 17, 2015; Janes, "Terrorism and Insurgency," data files on terrorism incidents, 2015–2019, undated-c; U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," webpage, undated-b.

NOTES: AQAP = Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. AQIM = Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. ISGS = Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. JRTN = Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandiya. KH = Kata'ib Hizballah. MSC = Mujahideen Shura Council. PFLP = Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. PFLP-GC = Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command. PIJ = Palestinian Islamic Jihad. PKK = Kurdistan Workers' Party. PLF = Palestinian Liberation Front.

[a] Information in this column reflects 2015–2019 data (2020 data are incomplete).

[b] In July 2015, a Kuwait-born U.S. resident shot and killed five service members Chattanooga, Tennessee. See Holpuch and Yuhas, 2015.

[c] One American was wounded but not killed in the Istanbul nightclub shooting on New Year's Eve, 2017. See Engel, 2017.

FMF purchases featured high-end conventional armaments, such as F-16 fighter jets and M1A1 Abrams tank kits that have little relevance to the country's terrorist threat,[47] and sustainment of those capabilities takes up a significant share of current FMF. Since the Obama-era reforms, naval capabilities that would appear to be designed to compete for energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean have been an additional focus of Cairo's FMF expenditures.[48] This is despite the fact that Washington's integrated country strategy for Egypt, which is intended to link U.S. programming in Egypt to agreed-on interagency goals, identifies the "highest immediate priority [as] expanding the partnership with the Government of Egypt (GoE) to counter active terrorist threats that also endanger the United States homeland and those of our allies."[49]

Just as some priority recipients of U.S. assistance are poor performers in countering terrorism, so too is there a lack of focus on countries suffering the highest rates of terrorism. Two of the four MENA countries most afflicted by terrorism are Libya and Yemen; however, U.S. assistance to the internationally recognized governments of these states—the Government of National Accord and the Republic of Yemen Government, respectively,—is limited. Although the absorptive capacity of these governments is a practical obstacle, just as the absence of an in-country U.S. embassy constrains the ability to deliver counterterrorism support, there would still appear to be gaps in U.S. support if countering terrorism is a priority objective.

Proxy War Risk and Intra-Regional Competition

The second risk, and one also exemplified in Libya and Yemen, is that U.S. partners are engaged in a destructive regional competition that has manifested in full-blown proxy conflicts (see Table 2.4). It is particularly troubling that the states most involved in those proxy conflicts—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE on one hand, and Turkey and Qatar on the other—are all high-priority U.S. partners. And in the case of Yemen, the Saudi-led coalition has implicated the United States in its conduct through the employment of U.S. weapons and, until 2018, through U.S. aerial refueling of strike aircraft that repeatedly struck civilian targets.[50] In Libya, the United Nations believes

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[47] The second-largest share of Egypt's defense acquisitions from FY 2009 to FY 2019 were rotary-wing aircraft, which arguably do have an important counterterrorism application. Fighter aircraft and tanks were the first- and fourth-largest shares, respectively, while support and sustainment constituted the third-largest share (Hartung and Binder, 2020).

[48] Aaron Mehta, "State Clears $1.5 Billion in Arms Sales for Egypt, South Korea and Canada," *Defense News*, July 30, 2019.

[49] U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Egypt*, Washington, D.C., November 14, 2019a, p. 2.

[50] Phil Stewart, "U.S. Halting Refueling of Saudi-Led Coalition Aircraft in Yemen's War," Reuters, November 9, 2018; United Nations Security Council, "Letter Dated 25 January 2019 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen Addressed to the President of the Security Council—Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen," Geneva, S/2019/83, January 25, 2019.

Table 2.4
Proxy War Risk Indicators

Country	Involved in Proxy War Outside Its Borders?	Participation in Intra-GCC Dispute?
Algeria	No	No
Bahrain	No	Yes
Egypt	Yes (Libya)	Yes
Iraq	No	No
Israel	Yes (Syria)	No
Jordan	Yes (Libya)	No
Kuwait	No	No
Lebanon	No	No
Libya	No	No
Morocco	No	No
Oman	No	No
Qatar	Yes (Libya)	Yes
Saudi Arabia	Yes (Yemen)	Yes
Tunisia	No	No
Turkey	Yes (Syria, Libya)	Yes
UAE	Yes (Libya, Yemen)	Yes
Yemen	No	No

NOTES: The UAE and Egypt are known to back General Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army through airstrikes, arming, and funding; Jordan has also supported Haftar with arms. Turkey backs the GNA via unmanned aircraft system strikes and equipment transfers, whereas Qatar is believed to fund and equip Islamist groups. We characterize Israeli strikes against Iranian-backed forces in Syria as part of a proxy war in that country. The states coded as participants in the intra-GCC dispute are the so-called quartet that took the strongest line against Qatar, along with Qatar and Turkey, which formed the opposing camp.

that at least five MENA partners (Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Turkey, and the UAE) are violating an arms embargo to support their preferred surrogates on the ground.[51]

The destructive regional competition also extends to the Gulf, where intra-GCC feuding has created a further obstacle to regional stability. Within the Gulf, that competition stymies efforts at building collective defense capabilities—such as joint ballistic missile defense—that would reduce these states' dependence on the United States for their security. Outside the GCC, a major motivation for GCC countries' involvement in conflicts in Libya and the Horn of Africa is the role of political Islam. This also shapes the views of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen toward local actors. On one hand, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE desire to stamp out influence from the

[51] Michelle Nichols, "Jordan, UAE, Turkey, Sudan Accused of Violating Sanctions on Libya—U.N. Report," Reuters, November 11, 2019; Declan Walsh, "Waves of Russian and Emirati Flights Fuel Libyan War, U.N. Finds," *New York Times*, September 3, 2020.

Muslim Brotherhood, which these states believe could provide a base for its brand of political Islam in the region. Conversely, Qatar and Turkey back groups that are Muslim Brotherhood affiliates or adhere to similar ideologies,[52] and Turkey in particular has escalated its involvement in regional conflicts to prevent outcomes supported by its rivals (e.g., General Haftar's consolidation of power in Libya).

In addition to the countries' opposing stances vis-à-vis the role of political Islam, economic and territorial considerations also drive their intra-regional competition. In particular, competition over maritime boundaries, disputed territories, and rights to explore natural gas deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean are increasing tensions between Turkey and Greece, which is backed by France, Egypt, Israel, and the UAE. All parties involved are priority U.S. partners or allies, presenting another instance of the United States having to balance between its partners' competing and potentially destabilizing policy objectives. Moreover, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean have mounted, in part because of ongoing instability in the Libyan conflict, reflecting how long-running conflicts can metastasize and fuel new or previously dormant confrontations. In Libya's case, Turkey exploited the ongoing civil war and weak position of the internationally recognized government to redraw maritime boundaries and shift the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean, at the expense of Greece and Egypt.[53]

These proxy conflicts introduce three additional costs to U.S. partnerships with the states involved in them. First, security cooperation with belligerents in proxy conflicts can inadvertently involve the United States in conflicts that are peripheral to U.S. interests. Second, they can damage the standing of the United States when partners engage in activities that are outside the norms the United States aspires to uphold. And third, they can put the United States in an "us or them" predicament when competing blocs of partners are feuding, as is the case in the current dispute between the GCC and Egypt on one side, and another GCC member (Qatar) and Turkey on the other. Thus far, the rival blocs have not forced the ultimate decision of conditioning basing and access on breaking ties with their rivals, but the states' boycotts of one another have complicated travel between countries for U.S. personnel, and Washington has had to curtail its participation in regional exercises when its demands for inclusive participation, which bridged the GCC divide, were not met.[54]

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52 For a broader study of Turkey's foreign policy priorities and internal developments, see Stephen Flanagan, F. Stephen Larrabee, Anika Binnendijk, Katherine Costello, Shira Efron, James Hoobler, Magdalena Kirchner, Jeffrey Martini, Alireza Nader, and Peter A. Wilson, *Turkey's Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2589-A, 2020.

53 John V. Bowlus, "Pulling Back the Curtain on Turkey's Natural Gas Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, August 26, 2020; Marc Pierini, *New Power Struggles in the Mediterranean*, Brussels, Belgium: Carnegie Europe, July 30, 2020.

54 Jon Gambrell, "U.S. Military Halts Exercises Over Qatar Crisis," *Associated Press*, October 6, 2017.

Internal Unrest Risk

The final risk in the current prioritization of U.S. partners is the internal unrest that threatens regime survival or constrains U.S. freedom of maneuver (see Table 2.5). Five high-priority partners—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—are all ranked by the Fragile States Index as in the "warning" or "alert" bands (cells shaded

Table 2.5
Internal Unrest Indicators

Country	Freedom House Score	Polity Score (2018)	Fragility Score (2020)
Algeria	34	2	74.6
Bahrain	11	–10	63.9
Egypt	21	–4	86
Iraq	31	6	95.9
Israel	76	6	75.1[a]
Jordan	37	–3	75.4
Kuwait	36	–7	50.9
Lebanon	44	6	84.7
Libya	9	–77	95.2
Morocco	37	–4	71.2
Oman	23	–8	48
Qatar	25	–10	43.7
Saudi Arabia	7	–10	68.8
Tunisia	70	7	68.1
Turkey	32	–4	79.1
UAE	17	–8	38.1
Yemen	11	–77	112.4

SOURCES: Freedom House, "Countries and Territories: Global Freedom Scores," webpage, undated; Center for Systemic Peace, "Polity5 Project, Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2018," data set, 2018; Fragile States Index, "Global Data: Fragile States Index 2020," data set, 2020.
NOTES: Freedom House score rates "access to political rights and civil liberties;" states with scores below 35 are generally coded as "not free," states with scores from 36 to 69 are "partly free," and states with scores 70 and above are "free" (Freedom House, undated). Polity score provides another metric for rating and categorizing governance; scores between –10 and –6 are coded as "autocracy," between –5 and 5 are "anocracy," and 6 and above are "democracy;" a "–77" code indicates that the state is in an interregnum period in which the central state authority has collapsed. Fragility scores are drawn from the Fragile States Index, which rates 12 indexes of state stability, compiling them into a single fragility score, the maximum and least-stable score being 120. We have coded scores from 81 to 120 as "warning," 61 to 80 as "alert," and 1 to 60 as "stable."
[a] This score is for both Israel and the West Bank.

red and yellow in the table). Indeed, two of those states have experienced a successful or attempted military coup (Egypt in 2013 and Turkey in 2016), and the purges instituted by Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in Saudi Arabia in 2017, including the leadership of the U.S.-trained Saudi National Guard, revealed major fissures within the ruling elite. And, as noted previously, the United States has historical experience with losing priority partnerships via uprisings. Because the United States has few options among states that are categorized in the "stable" band—which in the MENA region encompasses only Israel,[55] Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE—there is no straightforward path for the United States to partner with a broad collective of states. This leaves the United States with two logical options: to invest in good governance in the region that might expand the pool of potential partners in the stable band or to fully price the risk of internal unrest into its partnerships.

Neglected Opportunities

In addition to the risks inherent in the U.S. prioritization of partnerships, there appear to be several neglected opportunities. The first is that in terms of functional focus, U.S. engagements with the MENA region on economic, health, governance, and social issues pale in comparison with Washington's security assistance. Indeed, the United States devotes roughly the same amount of funding to Economic Support Funds (ESFs) across the MENA region—ESF being one of the U.S. State Department's primary accounts for funding everything from good governance programs to economic opportunity improvements—as it does to FMF to Egypt in a given year. In a region of roughly half a billion people, many of whom lack access to basic services and economic opportunity, it is astounding that the United States would devote a roughly equivalent share of aid to Egypt's military procurement and sustainment as it would to ESF for the entire region.

Using the State Department's categorization of programs, we provide an overview of how the United States prioritizes its assistance to MENA countries by objective in Table 2.6. When we compare the peace and security category, which is dominated by FMF, with the governing justly and democratically (GJD) category, we find that the United States devotes more than 25 times the assistance to the former than it does to the latter. Indeed, all other assistance categories combined sum to just more than one-quarter of the aid devoted to peace and security.

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[55] The Fragile States Index has no stand-alone score for Israel; its score pertains to Israel and the West Bank, putting it in the "alert" band. We judge Israel (minus the Palestinian Territories) to be stable and thus cite it with the states that received a scoring of 60 and below in the "Fragility Score" column of Table 2.5.

Table 2.6
U.S. Assistance by Objective (Five-Year Annual Average from FY 2015 to FY 2019, $U.S.)

Country	Peace and Security	Governing Justly and Democratically	Investing in People	Economic Growth	Humanitarian Assistance
Algeria	2,140,000	0	0	0	0
Bahrain	4,360,400	0	0	0	0
Egypt	1,292,140,000	12,700,000	55,360,000	58,040,000	0
Iraq	339,020,000	50,340,000	6,600,000	63,500,000	10,800,000
Israel	3,220,000,000	0	0	0	0
Jordan	534,780,000	62,020,000	213,520,000	519,880,000	0
Kuwait	0	0	0	0	0
Lebanon	112,060,000	17,260,000	58,220,000	27,560,000	0
Libya (GNA)	25,320,000	14,400,000	0	5,960,000	0
Morocco	18,580,000	8,260,000	5,880,000	4,460,000	0
Oman	4,679,400	0	0	0	0
Qatar	0	0	0	0	0
Saudi Arabia	7,400	0	0	0	0
Tunisia	82,820,000	30,540,000	0	39,660,000	0
Turkey	3,299,600	0	0	0	0
UAE	0	0	0	0	0
Yemen (ROYG)	16,460,000	9,880,000	17,620,000	3,120,000	243,620,000

Table 2.6—Continued

Country	Peace and Security	Governing Justly and Democratically	Investing in People	Economic Growth	Humanitarian Assistance
Total	5,655,666,800	205,400,000	357,200,000	722,180,000	254,420,000

SOURCES: U.S. Agency for International Development, "Foreign Aid Explorer," webpage, undated; Andrew Miller, Seth Binder, and Louisa Keeler, *President Trump's FY21 Budget: Examining U.S. Assistance to the Middle East and North Africa in the Shadow of COVID-19*, Washington, D.C.: Project on Middle East Democracy, June 2020.

NOTES: Data show a five-year average, drawing on the Project on Middle East Democracy's (POMED's) reported data for FY 2015–FY 2019 on the actual amount of foreign aid provided—FY 2020 data reflect only the requested amount; beginning in FY 2018, the State Department recategorized GJD as "democracy, human rights, and governance." For consistency of reporting, both we and POMED have maintained the GJD title to categorize U.S. funding supporting democracy development and good governance; additionally, there is a large discrepancy between the scope of U.S. humanitarian assistance as parsed by POMED, which reports only the bilateral top-line appropriations, and that reported in the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Foreign Aid Explorer, which comprises both bilateral and multilateral accounts—Foreign Aid Explorer reports more than $2 billion in humanitarian relief to the region.

In a region in which countries are below the global average in government effectiveness,[56] there would appear to be opportunities for the United States to help develop regional governments' capacities. The benefit would not just accrue to the citizens of MENA countries but could increase stability in the region more broadly, reducing costs to the United States. Not surprisingly, the three MENA partners that are still mired in or just emerging from civil wars (Iraq, Libya, and Yemen) score the worst on the World Bank's governance effectiveness metric. Among countries at relative peace, Lebanon is a poor performer on this measure, barely eclipsing the bottom quartile of countries ranked by government effectiveness. And yet, the funding shows a clear deprioritization of programs that could address these shortfalls.[57]

Another missed opportunity is amplifying the voices of regional states that are attempting to de-escalate conflict in the region, either by governing inclusively (e.g., Tunisia) or by seeking to bridge the rivalries consuming today's Middle East (e.g., Kuwait and Oman). These efforts will not necessarily be reflected in assistance levels. Kuwait and Oman are high-income countries. And although Tunisia is lower-middle income, it is already the fifth-largest recipient of total U.S. bilateral assistance to MENA countries, trailing only Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq.[58] Rather than taking an assistance-based approach, the United States is in need of policy mechanisms that strengthen the positive messages from these states on governance and regional stability. Such mechanisms could take the form of establishing centers of excellence in these states, advocating for these countries to receive greater leadership opportunities in multilateral institutions, or partnering with them on diplomatic initiatives.

Toward a New Framework for Middle East Partnerships

The United States is in need of a new approach to its Middle East partnerships. The old approaches have led to a division of states into blocs that lack cohesiveness and have contributed to regional instability, initially based on the threat posed by the Soviet Union and now based on the threat posed by Iran. The old approaches also led to a feeling of entitlement by regional states that have made peace with Israel; those capitals look to Washington to be rewarded for taking steps that are in their interests. In the Gulf, the current formula has led to a large transfer of arms that has not made the region safer and, given the onset of multiple proxy wars and the underlying threat of

[56] According to the World Bank's government effectiveness measure, the average percentile rank of MENA countries is 46.29 percent relative to their global peers. So by that measure, MENA countries are collectively just below average (World Bank, "Worldwide Governance Indicators," data set, undated-c).

[57] Miller, Binder, and Keeler, 2020.

[58] Miller, Binder, and Keeler, 2020.

internal instability, that might instead have made the region more dangerous. Breaking from the traditional approach, we recommend that the United States recalibrate its relationships with regional countries based on an interest in enhancing regional stability, with a focus on improved governance and cooperation on counterterrorism and nonproliferation.

Some traditional indicators of a country's commitment to regional stability—such as Arab states' acceptance of Israel—remain important. But other issues also should come to the fore. Other opportunities include adoption of domestic policies by MENA countries that reduce the risk of internal unrest, effectively limit the incidence of terrorism, and eschew unnecessary confrontation with Iran. These more productive partnerships would increase the return on U.S. investment while mitigating the risks that the United States currently bears—free-riding, entrapment, and reputational exposure.

As a start, the United States could break from the mechanistic delivery of assistance to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan; these states have developed strong outreach to the Executive Branch and Congress to advocate for their aid allotments. This is not to say that these states would not remain major recipients of bilateral assistance. The United States could continue to help Israel build its missile defense systems, for example. Washington also could help Egypt and Jordan fight terrorism more effectively. But gone should be the days—and they have existed since 1987, except for a brief pause after President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi seized power—that Egypt can count on $1.3 billion in FMF. And despite Jordan embodying several characteristics of a good partner, the model of a five-year memorandum of understanding (MOU) that effectively sets U.S. assistance flows to Amman needs review.[59] This approach works against U.S. interests by depriving Washington of any leverage to adjust assistance based on partner performance in advancing shared interests.

Relatedly, U.S. policymakers should be open to closing the gap between the "Big 3" recipients—Israel, Egypt, and Jordan—and other partners. Using FY 2020 apportioned funds as a baseline, even the Big 3 recipient with the smallest apportioned funds—Egypt—still received more aid than the rest of the MENA countries combined.[60] Over the previous decade, Iraq, Tunisia, and Lebanon have grown as second-tier priority recipients of U.S. assistance. But they still receive assistance that is an order of magnitude smaller than that of the Big 3. Future American policymakers could consider whether the weight of U.S. interests in Israel, and in the two frontline Arab states that have normalized relations with it, are so substantial as to outweigh the rest of Washington's regional interests combined, particularly given the robust defense capabilities of the Big 3.

Washington also could consider overhauling its arms sales–centric approach to the Gulf states. The transfer of arms to these partners is thought to signal a U.S.

[59] The MOUs are nonbinding, but aid flows have tended to match or exceed them.

[60] Miller, Binder, and Keeler, 2020.

security commitment to the Gulf states and is a boost to the U.S. defense industry. But it also provides military capabilities to states that might use them in ways that undermine U.S. interests in regional stability. Saudi Arabia's employment of U.S.-made fighter jets and guided bombs in its air campaign in Yemen is the starkest example of this risk manifesting in a reality. The UAE's airstrikes in Libya—which are not coordinated with the United States[61]—could be another, although it is unclear whether the UAE relies on its French-made or U.S.-made aircraft for these missions.[62] As regional rivalries simmer and states fall into conflict, there is the potential that those experiences could be replicated. Moreover, if the Gulf states use these platforms to target core Iranian interests, it could spark a large-scale conflict that draws the United States into a war it might not want.

This risk is amplified when arms transfers come with technology transfer and local production of components, which both Saudi Arabia and the UAE seek. In this regard, Turkey's involvement in the coproduction of the F-35 is an instructive warning. Receiving or contributing to the production of sensitive weapon systems places the United States at risk that changes in the partner's foreign policy could lead to U.S. adversaries accessing that technology, speeding their development of counters to it. This is precisely the risk embodied in Turkey's receipt of the Russian S-400 air defense system and now-suspended involvement in the F-35 program, which risked Russia using the S-400 to identify vulnerabilities in the U.S. fifth-generation fighter aircraft.

Implementing our suggested approach would require the United States to value its global standing and interest in regional stability more highly than the benefits it perceives its weapon sales provide in reassuring Gulf partners and boosting the U.S. defense industry. Implementing the approach also would mean diversifying the U.S. approach to the Gulf in a way that does not privilege relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE above those with other Gulf partners or, at a minimum, in a way that narrows the prioritization among them. The other GCC states are less populous, possess smaller economies, and have fewer military capabilities the United States could employ in coalition operations, but several (Kuwait and Oman in particular) embrace policies that are more-closely aligned with de-escalating regional conflict, including rivalries within the Gulf itself.

The United States could consider establishing a center for regional diplomacy in Kuwait or Oman that would be a focal point for Arab-Persian and intra-Arab conflict resolution. Such an initiative would be a strong signal that Washington supports partners working toward de-escalation of conflict and ending unproductive disputes that distract from addressing the region's genuine security needs. More focus also could be

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[61] U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement on Libya by the Governments of France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States," Washington, D.C., August 25, 2014.

[62] David D. Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, "Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.," *New York Times*, August 25, 2014.

placed across the GCC on supporting domestic reform efforts that are already underway to help diversify these economies and train their labor forces in preparation for a post-oil future.

In addition to a basic misalignment between what we identify as U.S. interests in the region and Washington's underlying strategy to strengthen and further them, there are important changes in context that reinforce the need for an overhaul of the U.S. approach. The effects of climate change, public health crises, and chronic youth unemployment pose immense challenges to Middle Eastern societies that might eclipse traditional security concerns. Because the Middle East's people already inhabit some of the hottest and driest territory on earth, the effects of climate change are projected to include extreme heat, drought, increased dependence on food imports, sea level rises, and degradation of air quality.[63] As the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed, the region's health care systems lack the capacity to cope with health crises. And despite the long history of youth unemployment in the Middle East, the issue persists and leaves regional states struggling to manage youth responses that range from apathy to participation in protest movements that challenge the political order.

Clearly, state-to-state programs—particularly those focused on traditional conceptions of security—will be insufficient to address these issues. The stakeholders and potential actors who are able to address these emerging challenges are publics and professional communities (e.g., the scientific community, the business community, educators). Moreover, these challenges increase the fragility of the state, making U.S. investments that bet on the durability of partner governments that much riskier. This suggests that greater engagement with Middle Eastern publics could result in higher return on investment, particularly on emerging challenges.

Engagement with Middle Eastern publics could take the form of Washington (1) incentivizing American universities to increase collaborations with regional counterparts on such issues as climate science and (2) developing measures to mitigate the effects of climate change. It also could include rewarding U.S. institutions that engage in foreign direct investments that are projected to benefit the region's youth employment picture. Of course, some engagement will necessarily be government-to-government. In these instances, the United States could prioritize assistance to specific ministries that have a reputation for a lack of corruption and strong return on investment from bilateral assistance. These ministries might include Ministries of Planning, which often are key data collectors in recipient countries, with U.S. efforts designed to increase the rationality of partners' policymaking by helping them make better-informed decisions.

Furthermore, the United States does not need to shoulder this burden alone and should factor in and augment the constructive efforts its European partners are making in the region. Major European development and aid organizations—such as the British

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[63] World Bank, *Turn Down the Heat: Confronting the New Climate Normal*, Washington, D.C., 2014.

Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office; French Agency for Development; and German Agency for International Cooperation—fund projects throughout the region in such areas as economic equality, education, health, governance, infrastructure, innovation and technological incubation, and urban development.[64] Additionally, several European allies are members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and have deployed ground forces to Iraq in support of counter-ISIS train-and-equip efforts or conducted sorties against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.[65]

European partners also have sought to play constructive diplomatic roles in the region. Most prominently, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—the so-called E3—were JCPOA signatories and have worked to keep the deal afloat following the United States' unilateral withdrawal in 2018. European allies also have sponsored attempts to resolve long-running regional conflicts or lead aid and recovery efforts. However, European allies have, at times, pursued policies that compound intra-regional tensions or even exacerbate ongoing conflicts.[66] Therefore, the United States would do well to strengthen and complement European efforts that seek to foster development and stability in the Middle East while addressing European actions that exacerbate conflict, such as France and Italy's divergent stances on Libya.

To adopt these recommendations, U.S. policymakers will need to be prepared to address a challenge: allegations of abandonment by traditional U.S. partners and those partners' responses to it. Abandonment was a common regional complaint during the second term of the Obama administration, during which Washington placed conditions on U.S. assistance to Egypt, opposed Israel creating "facts on the ground,"[67] exhibited an unwillingness to significantly enter the Syrian conflict, prioritized counterterrorism objectives in Syria over Turkey's Kurdish concerns, and reached a nuclear agreement with Iran—all of which led to charges of abandonment by Egypt, Israel, Turkey, and the Gulf states. A similar dynamic likely will accompany implementation of the strategy outlined in this report, given that realignment of relationships will chal-

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64 Development Tracker, "Aid by Location: Current Projects," webpage, undated; Agence Française de Développement [French Agency for Development], "Proche et Moyen-Orient [Near and Middle East]," webpage, undated; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH [German Agency for International Cooperation], "Regional Cooperation in Asia," webpage, undated.

65 See The Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, "Partners," webpage, undated-b.

66 For instance, Germany, with the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, cosponsored the January 2020 Berlin Conference, which sought to establish a roadmap for diplomatically resolving the long-running Libyan Civil War. See United Nations Support Mission in Libya, "Berlin International Conference on Libya–19 January 2020," webpage, January 19, 2020. Conversely, France has provided diplomatic, intelligence, and military support to Libyan militia leader Khalifa Haftar, in part facilitating his failed military campaign to capture Tripoli and oust the United Nations–recognized Government of National Accord, from April 2019 to June 2020. See Emadeddin Badi, "Russia Isn't the Only One Getting Its Hands Dirty in Libya," *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2020.

67 "Obama Says Israeli Settlements Making Two-State Solution Impossible," Reuters, January 10, 2017.

lenge regional expectations (e.g., U.S. financial incentives for Arab-Israeli peace and few limitations on arms sales to the Gulf, except for preserving Israel's QME).

To assuage regional partners' fears of abandonment, U.S. policymakers could affirm that the United States is shifting the prioritization of aid, engagement, and support rather than withdrawing it. Additionally, U.S. policymakers could emphasize that the reoriented approach to the region is driven by its genuine commitment to regional stability. Addressing economic, health, and climate challenges might not align with regional governments' priority asks of Washington, but advancing these issues would be mutually beneficial to the United States and its regional partners.

Moreover, what U.S. policymakers might keep in mind is that although being in good favor in Middle East capitals is advantageous, it is not the objective of U.S. foreign policy in the region. The objective is to advance U.S. interests, including those that are shared with regional partners. That our proposed strategy would come at the cost of straining ties with traditional partners does not mean that it would not be a more effective strategy. Some of that blowback could be reduced, however, by focusing U.S. engagement on new challenges in which set formulas for interaction have not yet been established; thus, cooperation is more likely to be seen in Middle East capitals as an opportunity rather than a rebuke. Scientific collaboration and technology transfer to address climate change is one area that might be ripe for the United States to begin with in changing how it engages with regional partners.

Relatedly, to dissuade future U.S policymakers from pursuing such an approach, regional actors likely will threaten to partner with U.S. adversaries, particularly China. Such hedging strategies are a staple regional response since at least the Cold War and are on full display today. We analyze the risks of that occurring more fully in Chapter Four. However, for our purposes, it is worth noting that although some of these threats might be bluster, and although the United States maintains significant leverage with partners and advantages over global competitors, there is a possibility that partners will hedge against their perception of U.S. abandonment by strengthening ties with other states, including U.S. regional and extra-regional adversaries. This risk should be factored in when making a final cost-benefit calculation before adopting a new approach to Middle East partnerships.

CHAPTER THREE

Managing Adversaries

The United States faces a variety of adversaries—both state and nonstate actors—in the Middle East. Although our approach argues for moving beyond solely threat-based assessments toward a positive vision of outcomes the United States might support, a regional strategy cannot ignore the array of challenges that can disrupt longer-term engagement with the region. We find that managing adversarial relationships—rather than attempting to definitively solve them—is the best approach to preventing further escalation, conflict, and instability. Regional conflicts can become all-consuming for U.S. policy, risking costly military interventions at the expense of a more positive agenda focused on growth and opportunity. Consequently, managing and constraining state and nonstate adversaries, and addressing the underlying drivers of conflict to prevent them from arising or expanding, are critical components of an effective U.S. regional strategy.

In this chapter, we consider the region's principal actors: Iran, the armed Shi'a groups it sponsors, Syria, and Sunni extremist groups (i.e., ISIS and Al Qaeda). We focus on the key state and nonstate U.S. adversaries and conflict zones where the United States is directly engaged (primarily Syria and Iraq), although our analysis and recommendations can apply to other regional conflicts, such as those in Yemen and Libya, that we do not explore in depth here. After reviewing the challenges these adversaries pose to U.S. interests, we summarize the results of policies adopted to address them and consider the most-appropriate approaches going forward to contain and mitigate these threats.

As noted earlier, we consider the most-pressing challenges to U.S. interests in the region to be regional instability and protracted conflict; together, these issues create a conducive environment for nuclear proliferation, violent extremism, and the rise of transnational terrorist organizations. Rather than seeking maximalist solutions that come with a high cost and risk of failure, we propose a strategy to constrain regional adversaries and reduce violent conflict while investing in longer-term measures to foster regional stability. More specifically, we suggest a series of fundamental reforms that affect the daily lives of those in the region by providing jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, improved governance, and a greater reliance on diplomatic measures to resolve conflict.

Dealing with Iran

Our study asked what a regional strategy might look like if we no longer prioritize confrontation with Iran as a key organizing principle. That said, no serious regional strategy can ignore a power as important as Iran. Iran's nuclear aspirations and regional activities, particularly its ties to nonstate militias and expanding missile capabilities, remain critical concerns for American interests in regional stability. The challenge is to be realistic about the dangers posed by Iran without exaggerating them in ways that can risk overreaction and counterproductive policies. This requires an accurate assessment of the Iranian threat, an evaluation of current policies to address the threat, and, finally, a consideration of an alternative framework to manage the Iranian challenge over the long term.

Rightsizing the Iranian Threat

As a previous RAND Corporation report put it, Iran is "dangerous but not omnipotent."[1] Its power and influence face serious constraints, suggesting that policies leveraging natural pushback to Iranian overreach—both regional and domestic—might be a more prudent way to check Iran's power than direct confrontation. A U.S. strategy will need to accept Iranian presence in the Middle East; notions of pushing Iran out of the region are simply unrealistic given Iran's size and historical role in regional affairs. Even Iran's most-vocal regional adversaries understand that Iran is part of the region. But U.S. policies can aim to limit the damage Iran's interventions inflict. The goal for a U.S. Iran strategy, in short, should be to contain and deflate Iran's power and influence over time.

This requires understanding the nature of the Iranian threat and its limits. At the military level, Iran's capabilities are far less formidable than often purported. Its conventional forces are particularly weak. Multiple and redundant defense structures limit Iran's military effectiveness and ability to project power and sustain combat beyond its borders.[2] Years of international sanctions have prevented Iran's modernization of its military equipment, forcing it to rely on lower-quality Russian and Chinese systems and its own defense industrial base.[3] Iran's ground forces lack armored vehicles and modern tanks, although there have been reports that Iran has been benefiting from Russian military technology to develop its Karar battle tank.[4] The majority of Iran's combat aircraft are obsolete, which helps explain its attempts to improve its

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[1] Wehrey et al., 2009.

[2] Hanna and Dassa Kaye, 2015.

[3] See Thomas Juneau, "The Enduring Constraints on Iran's Power After the Nuclear Deal," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 134, No. 1, Spring 2019.

[4] "Report: Serious Change in the Armor Capability of the Armed Forces/Injection of Hundreds of New Tanks into the Army and IRGC Combat Organization," *Tasnim News*, undated.

combat capabilities through acquisition of Chinese and Russian missile systems and through domestic production of unmanned aerial vehicles and combat aircraft.[5] But such acquisitions are no match for the Western-supplied advanced aircraft in the arsenals of regional rivals, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, and certainly are no match for U.S. military forces stationed in the region. Moreover, Arab Gulf states vastly outspend Iran on defense.[6]

The most serious military challenge posed by Iran stems from its asymmetric capabilities, which are largely controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Tehran's investment in advanced missiles to offset its inferior airpower is a particular concern, given the missiles' improved precision and lethality and ability to reach the entire region, including American military bases and Israel.[7] This threat is one that might require Gulf states to bolster missile defense systems. Iran used missiles and drones to attack oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and oil tankers in the Gulf in 2019, following the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018.[8] The supply of Iranian missiles to nonstate partners, such as Hizballah in Lebanon, amplifies Iran's regional reach and has been used in regional wars against Israel. But Iran's own air defense system remains vulnerable to advanced stealth aircraft, and its asymmetric naval capabilities (including mine warfare) can significantly disrupt—but ultimately cannot prevent—access to the Persian Gulf for an extended period.[9] Iran's offensive cyber capabilities are another area of concern, although they are vulnerable to effective counterattacks from such countries as Israel.[10]

In addition to military constraints, one structural reality that limits Iran's regional influence is the fact that Iran is the only Persian state in the region. Iran faces a containment ring of Arab states, plus Israel, that are eager to limit Iranian power.[11] Even when it came to saving its Arab state ally in Syria, Iran and Iranian-aligned ground forces would not have been capable of keeping Assad in power without the decisive airpower intervention from Russia in 2015.[12] Iran's ability to increase support to its

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[5] Hanna and Dassa Kaye, 2015.

[6] See "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," in International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020, pp. 324–387.

[7] Hanna and Dassa Kaye, 2015.

[8] "Special Report: 'Time to Take Out Our Swords'—Inside Iran's Plot to Attack Saudi Arabia," Reuters, November 25, 2019.

[9] Hanna and Dassa Kaye, 2015.

[10] See Gil Baram and Kevjn Lim, "Israel and Iran Just Showed Us the Future of Cyberwar with Their Unusual Attacks," *Foreign Policy*, June 5, 2020.

[11] See Juneau, 2019.

[12] The Russian perception that the collapse of the Assad regime was imminent was among the key factors driving the Russian intervention in Syria. See Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3180-AF, 2019.

regional proxies after the economic windfall of the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015 ultimately did not, as some feared, significantly alter the military balance in such conflict areas as Syria or Yemen. Concerns about an Iranian land bridge to transport fighters and equipment from Iran across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon also did not fully materialize because of several limitations facing the bridge. As a former Israeli foreign minister put it, "Iran's land corridor, which inspires so much fear in its regional neighbors, depends on unreliable local proxies, making it unsustainable. And that doesn't even account for its vulnerability to American air strikes."[13] Indeed, Israel's "campaign between the wars" has succeeded in checking Iran's foothold in Syria, with hundreds of airstrikes directed against Iranian or Iranian-aligned targets and the Russians largely looking the other way.[14]

Iran faces regional pushback not only from Sunni extremist groups, such as ISIS, which it fought in Iraq after the group's rise in 2014, but even from such friendly Arab countries as Iraq and Lebanon, where nationalist forces remain a bulwark against unhindered Iranian influence. Iran certainly has more sway in these two countries. Iran maintains close ties to Shiʿa leadership in Iraq, many of whom took refuge in Iran during Saddam Hussein's rule. And its most successful nonstate relationship is with Hizballah,[15] a key power broker in Lebanon. But even among these allies, Iran does not call all the shots; these partners have their own domestic constituencies and pressures. Resentment over Iranian interference seems to be growing in Iraq and Lebanon, as we explore further in the next section, with ongoing protests calling for more accountability and attention to domestic economic pressures rather than regional adventures. Iran's soft power in the region also has faded. Iran's support for Assad's brutal crackdown in Syria and the declining popularity of such leaders as Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon have reduced the appeal of the so-called resistance camp among Arab publics as attention turns to domestic crises.[16]

Finally, Iran continues to face domestic vulnerabilities. The reinstatement of U.S. sanctions after the American withdrawal from the nuclear agreement had a devastating

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[13] Shlomo Ben-Ami, "Iran, the Hollow Hegemon," *Project Syndicate*, January 24, 2018. For a description of the land bridge and an argument supporting the notion that Iranian influence has prevailed in the Levant, see Fabrice Balanche, "The Iranian Land Bridge in the Levant: The Return of Territory in Geopolitics," Telos, September 14, 2018.

[14] See Amos Yadlin and Assaf Orion, "The Campaign Between Wars: Faster, Higher, Fiercer?" *INSS Insight*, No. 1209, August 30, 2019. Also see Dalia Dassa Kaye and Shira Efron, "Israel's Evolving Iran Policy," *Survival*, Vol. 62, No. 4, August–September 2020.

[15] For an overview of the relationships between Iran and its proxy partners, see Trevor Johnston, Matthew Lane, Abigail Casey, Heather J. Williams, Ashley L. Rhoades, James Sladden, Nathan Vest, Jordan R. Reimer, and Ryan Haberman, *Could the Houthis Be the Next Hizballah? Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2551-OSD, 2020.

[16] Shibley Telhami, *Arab Perspectives on Iran's Role in a Changing Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, 2013, p. 2.

impact on the Iranian economy, including a drastic reduction in Iran's oil exports.[17] But Iran's ability to reap the economic benefits of the agreement were already limited. Remaining non-nuclear sanctions tied to terrorism, human rights concerns, and economic mismanagement and corruption contributed to a difficult investment environment even without renewed U.S. sanctions. The ban on dollar transactions processed through U.S. financial institutions made it difficult for global investors to safely trade with Iran, limiting Iran's ability to integrate into the global economic system as many had hoped it would following the nuclear agreement. The reinstatement of secondary sanctions following the U.S. withdrawal, low oil prices, and regional instability exacerbated Iran's already grim economic outlook. The COVID-19 pandemic placed further strain on the economy.[18] High unemployment, particularly among youth, and soaring inflation also have taken a toll on the Iranian people, leading to prohibitively high living costs and shortages of medical supplies.[19] Widespread protests in fall 2019 ostensibly were provoked by a gasoline price hike but reflected deeper socioeconomic and political grievances. Although these protests, like previous ones, were brutally repressed, the conditions contributing to societal unrest remain.

In sum, any consideration of Iran policies to support a broader U.S. Middle East strategy must account for the limits of Iran's military capabilities, its regional reach, and its own pressures at home. Iran is a formidable regional adversary but is a challenge that can be managed. To do so, however, requires a critical assessment of current approaches and consideration of alternative policies.

Assessing the Maximum Pressure Approach

The pressure approach on Iran is long-standing. Since the Iranian revolution in 1979 that ousted the pro-American Shah, U.S. Iran policy has drawn on a variety of tools to deter and respond to Iranian actions—particularly its support for terrorism and expanding nuclear program—against the United States and its regional partners. These tools have included sanctions, military support for Iran's adversaries, and sabotage of Iran's nuclear facilities to contain and degrade Iran's capabilities—the 2011 Stuxnet operation being a prominent example.[20]

To a greater extent over the past 20 years, direct U.S. force presence in the region has become a fixture of Washington's counter-Iran strategy, even if these deployments

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17 Iran's crude oil sales fell from approximately 2.5 million barrels per day during the JCPOA to below 300,000 barrels per day by mid-2020, after the reimposition of secondary sanctions and removal of waivers by the Trump administration. See Kenneth Katzman, *Iran Sanctions*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RS20871, updated July 23, 2020.

18 Bijan Khajehpour, "Coronavirus Puts More Pressure on Iran's Already Strained Economy," *Al-Monitor*, March 2, 2020.

19 See Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Opinion: With Chaos in the Streets of Iran, Here's How the U.S. Could Help the Iranian People," *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 2019.

20 Council on Foreign Relations, "Stuxnet," webpage, July 2010.

also support other missions in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Indeed, the manning of U.S. deterrence missions in the Gulf generally far exceeds that of other recent U.S. contingency operations in the region (with the exception of Operation Iraqi Freedom, which peaked at 165,000 troops during the surge). For instance, Operation Spartan Shield—a major component of U.S. operations to deter Iranian aggression in the Gulf—maintains a force presence of 10,000 U.S. service members. Additionally, when accounting for the 5th Fleet carrier group and U.S. Marine Amphibious Readiness Group, upwards of 20,000 U.S. service members are deployed to the Gulf for what amounts to a deterrence of Iran mission. By contrast, the high point of U.S. service members deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Inherent Resolve was around 9,000 (and mostly averaged about 5,000). Therefore, the peak U.S. force presence for the largest recent contingency operation in the MENA region amounted to less than the generally constant force presence level for Spartan Shield, which is just one component of the broader strategy to deter Iran in the Gulf. Trump administration officials asserted in 2018 that U.S. forces in Syria to counter ISIS would remain until Iranian and Iranian-backed forces departed, appearing to expand the U.S. military beyond their authorized mission, but a string of DoD officials subsequently testified in Congress and stated publicly that the coalition's military mission had not changed.[21]

But it is sanctions that have proven to be the signature U.S. policy tool to keep Iran boxed in for more than 40 years. Since sanctions were first imposed during the Iran hostage crisis from 1979 to 1981, successive administrations have employed them as a key element of U.S. Iran policy. The United States designated Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1984 after the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Lebanon, which was attributed to the Iranian-supported groups later affiliated with Hizballah. That designation triggered a series of sanctions that remained even after nuclear-related sanctions were lifted in 2015. During the Clinton administration, most trade and investment to Iran was banned, and the administration and Congress increased pressure on Iran's energy sector with the 1996 Iran and Libya Sanctions Act to reduce Iran's ability to finance terrorist groups or its nuclear program. Subsequent banking and finance sanctions, including a campaign by the U.S. Treasury Department from 2006 to 2016 to persuade foreign banks to cease doing business in Iran, added to the global pressure against Tehran.[22]

The 2015 international agreement to curtail Iran's nuclear capabilities, the JCPOA, was the first significant easing of U.S. sanctions on Iran. The central premise of the deal required new constraints on Iran's civilian nuclear program and increased access to its nuclear sites in exchange for sanctions relief.[23] But the JCPOA lifted only

[21] Paul Sonne and Missy Ryan, "Bolton: U.S. Forces Will Stay in Syria Until Iran and Its Proxies Depart," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2018.

[22] For a detailed overview of all U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran from 1979 to 2020, see Katzman, 2020.

[23] U.S. Department of State, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Vienna, Austria, July 14, 2015.

nuclear-related sanctions, keeping other terrorism- and human rights–related sanctions in place. And, as mentioned earlier, the JCPOA left considerable uncertainty for international investors about the risks of doing business in Iran.

Nonetheless, the agreement curbed Iran's nuclear program, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran was abiding by its terms on multiple occasions.[24] U.S. pressure, combined with multilateral support for isolating Iran in the years leading up to the JCPOA, likely played an important role in bringing the Iranians to the negotiating table. But ultimately, it was the promise of *lifting* economic pressure that proved a critical factor in Iran's agreement to restrict key dimensions of its nuclear program. Even prominent critics of the nuclear agreement in Israel and like-minded countries acknowledged that the agreement was working, despite lingering concerns about some of its provisions and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's vocal opposition to the agreement.[25] Despite continued opposition to the JCPOA from regional leaders, which was more muted in the Arab Gulf than in Israel, all of the international participants of the JCPOA, including Russia, China, and European powers, continued to support the agreement.

Notwithstanding this general international consensus, President Trump adamantly opposed the agreement and vowed to pull the United States out of it.[26] The President's top advisers in his first year in office, including Defense Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, advised that the United States should stay in the agreement and build on it to expand its focus to other areas of concern—a position also favored by U.S. European allies.[27] Nonetheless, President Trump ultimately chose to unilaterally withdraw the United States from the JCPOA in May 2018 and pursue a policy of maximum pressure against Iran. New personnel in the administration, particularly Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, actively supported this approach.

The purposes of the maximum pressure campaign were unclear, from bringing about a "better" nuclear deal through new negotiations to "more-normal" Iranian behavior in the region, or, as some saw it, a list of demands that was so broad as to suggest that the ultimate aim was to pressure Iran to the point of regime collapse.[28]

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[24] See International Atomic Energy Agency, "IAEA and Iran—IAEA Reports," webpage, undated.

[25] Dassa Kaye and Efron, 2020.

[26] "Transcript: Trump's Remarks on Iran Nuclear Deal," *NPR*, October 13, 2017.

[27] Corentin Brustlein, James Dobbins, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Oliver Meier, Marco Overhaus, Neil Quilliam, Charles Ries, Dorothée Schmid, Sanam Vakil, and Azadeh Zamirirad, "Saving Transatlantic Cooperation and the Iran Nuclear Deal: A View from Europe and the United States," *SWP Comment*, February 2018.

[28] Mike Pompeo, "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," speech delivered at the Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., May 21, 2018. The list of demands on Iran includes full disclosure of past military dimensions of its nuclear program to the IAEA and abandonment of all such work in perpetuity; a halt to enrichment and agreement to never pursue plutonium reprocessing; IAEA access to all sites in the country; an end to proliferation of ballistic missiles; release of all U.S. citizens and allied citizens; an end to support of Middle East terrorist groups; permission to disarm Shi'a militias in Iraq; and end to support to the Houthis; a withdrawal of forces from Syria;

The key mechanism for the new pressure campaign was once again sanctions. The United States not only reinstated all sanctions lifted through the nuclear deal, but also added a series of new sanctions, including the designation of the IRGC as a terrorism-supporting entity. A key feature of maximum pressure was to draw on the vast economic power of the United States to punish any global actor—friend or foe—who sought to invest in or trade with Iran. By May 2019, the administration ended most waivers for countries that were still importing Iranian oil, seeking to bring Iran's oil exports down to zero in the most ambitious pressure campaign to date. The Trump administration was not just continuing long-standing pressure policies, it was doubling down on them, even at the risk of alienating the United States's closest global partners in Europe and Asia, who supported the JCPOA and opposed U.S. secondary sanctions. Even during the 2020 presidential transition, the Trump administration proposed a "flood" of new sanctions on Iran in what some reports claimed was an attempt to make it more difficult for the Biden administration to rejoin the agreement.[29]

The results have not been positive: Iran has not come back to the negotiating table, and its government has not collapsed. There is no doubt that the pressure campaign has hurt the Iranian economy, drastically reducing oil exports and contributing to an economic downturn and serious pain for both the government and the Iranian people. The Iranians have found workarounds through solidifying ties with China and other markets, but the economic pressures have been severe, particularly when combined with plunging oil prices and the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, by any measure that is based on the policy goals and outcomes articulated in administration statements, maximum pressure policies have not worked.

If the goal was to use maximum pressure to force a better deal, we have yet to see a new deal or even a viable negotiating process. The Iranian leadership shunned any direct engagement with the Trump administration despite reported attempts by the administration to jumpstart talks.[30] In fact, instead of negotiating a better deal, Iran increased its nuclear capacity. Although Iran's violations of the JCPOA initially were measured and reversible, they progressed steadily by the end of the Trump presidency. The JCPOA had restricted uranium enrichment to 3.67 percent, but after the U.S. withdrawal and maximum pressure policies, Iran increased the levels to 4.5 percent and, by early January 2020, Iran announced enrichment at 20 percent at an under-

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an end to support for the Taliban in Afghanistan; an end to IRGC Quds force support for military partners around the world; and an end to threatening behavior against its neighbors.

[29] Barak Ravid, "Trump Administration Plans 'Flood' of Sanctions on Iran by Jan. 20," *Axios*, November 8, 2020.

[30] Rick Gladstone, "Iran Says Trump Sought Meeting with President 8 Times at U.N. Last Year," *New York Times*, July 18, 2018.

ground nuclear facility.[31] Enrichment to 20 percent significantly increases the ability to convert civilian nuclear capabilities into weapons-grade material. Under the terms of the JCPOA, Iran was allowed to stockpile up to 300 kilograms of low-enriched uranium. By August 2020, reports revealed IAEA findings that Iran's stockpiles had increased to more than 2,000 kilograms.[32] Noting Iranian backtracking on its nuclear commitments, including enriched uranium at 12 times the levels permitted in the deal, the head of the IAEA urged the Biden administration to reengage Iran.[33] This larger stockpile decreases Iran's *break-out time*, the time it takes to produce enough fissile material to make a nuclear weapon should Iran decide to do so, which was extended to up to a year under the terms of the JCPOA. In short, maximum pressure has proven to be counterproductive if the goal is to prevent Iranian advances toward a nuclear weapons capability.

If the goal is to prevent or degrade Iran's ability to support dangerous nonstate militia groups throughout the region, it also appears to have been unsuccessful. A Congressional Research Service report assesses that U.S. sanctions, including their reimposition after 2018, have had minimal effect on Iran's regional activities, which have continued regardless of sanctions policies.[34] And since the administration's maximum pressure attempt to bring Iran's oil exports to zero, Iran has escalated its destabilizing activities in the region. As mentioned earlier, Iran lashed out against regional oil assets beginning in summer 2019, striking oil tankers in the Gulf and oil infrastructure, including a brazen attack against Saudi Aramco. The Iranians shot down an American unmanned aerial surveillance aircraft near the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian-aligned militias attacked U.S. forces in Iraq and threatened the U.S. embassy, leading to retaliatory U.S. strikes in Iraq and, ultimately, to the killing of IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. Iran responded to the Soleimani assassination by launching missiles against U.S. bases in Iraq. Subsequent militia attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq, which we discuss further in the next section, killed two American and one British personnel, and rocket attacks against U.S. targets in Iraq are ongoing.[35]

Maximum pressure not only has fallen short in curbing Iran's nuclear ambitions and reducing its dangerous regional activities, it also has isolated the United States

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[31] Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Resumes 20% Enrichment at Fordow Amid Rising Tensions with U.S.," Reuters, January 4, 2021.

[32] Kiyoko Metzler and David Rising, "IAEA: Iran Continues to Expand Stockpile of Enriched Uranium," Associated Press, September 4, 2020.

[33] Pamela Falk, "IAEA Chief Says Nuclear Security Risks Increased Under Trump, Urges Biden to Re-Engage," *CBS News*, December 16, 2020.

[34] Katzman, 2020.

[35] For further details on the U.S.-Iran escalation after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA, see Kenneth Katzman, Kathleen J. McInnis, and Clayton Thomas, *U.S.-Iran Conflict and Implications for U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R45795, May 8, 2020.

rather than Iran. Israel and several Arab Gulf partners have supported the U.S. maximum pressure campaign, although even Gulf partners began engaging Iran in attempts to de-escalate tensions.[36] However, no major global power, including all parties to the JCPOA, endorsed U.S. maximum pressure policies. The most notable demonstration of this was the overwhelming rejection of an attempt by the Trump administration to "snapback" United Nations sanctions on Iran, despite having left the JCPOA, in an effort to prevent the lifting of a conventional arms embargo of Iran in fall 2020. Europeans and others, who would otherwise be inclined to support efforts to rein in conventional arms exports to Iran, viewed these U.S. threats as an attempt to derail the JCPOA and the legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council. The majority of states concluded that the United States had no standing to demand a restoration of sanctions after leaving the agreement in 2018.[37]

This assessment of maximum pressure policies and previous sanctions against Iran suggests that economic pressure alone, particularly unilateral pressure, has not proven to be successful in reining in Iran's nuclear program or its regional activities. Other tactics, such as sabotage on Iranian nuclear facilities, might yield some success in slowing Iran's nuclear development, but they are unlikely to prevent it; kinetic attacks might only further incentivize the Iranians to pursue a nuclear deterrent.[38] And hopes that more pressure will lead to regime change, or regime collapse, appear to be founded more on faith than reality. Unfortunately, the Iranian government has proven itself to be resilient in the face of decades of pressure, covert action, and domestic unrest, brutally cracking down on dissent and finding ways to benefit from economic sanctions even as the Iranian people continue to suffer. Such failings underscore the need for new approaches to Iran.

Rethinking the Iranian Challenge

The Iranian challenge is not just about its nuclear capabilities. However, if those capabilities are not contained, Iran's other activities in the region become far more perilous. And if Iran succeeds in becoming a nuclear-armed state, other regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt, could follow.[39] Such an outcome would not only undermine regional stability but also threaten U.S. interests in maintaining global

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36 "Rivals Iran and UAE to Hold Maritime Security Talks," Reuters, July 30, 2019.

37 See Kylie Atwood, "U.S. Isolated as Allies and Opponents Reject Its Bid to Snapback UN Sanctions on Iran," *CNN*, August 20, 2020.

38 See Dalia Dassa Kaye, "An Israeli Escalation Against Iran?" *RAND Blog*, July 15, 2020.

39 See Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours," *Survival*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 2007; Mehran Kamrava, *The Nuclear Question in the Middle East*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2012; and U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Chain Reaction: Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, February 2008. On current global proliferation risks, see Eric Brewer, Ilan Goldenberg, Joseph Rodgers, Maxwell Simon, and Kaleigh Thomas, *Toward a More Proliferated World?* Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, September 2, 2020.

nonproliferation norms. Consequently, any strategy toward Iran needs to first address the nuclear threat, not at the expense of other regional concerns about Iran but as a precondition for addressing them.

As mentioned earlier, covert measures or an overt military strike are not likely to work any better than they have in the past at preventing nuclear advances if a state is determined to move forward. At best, such measures can slow progress but they might further incentivize a country like Iran to pursue a nuclear option to prevent such attacks in the future—not to mention the risk that military strikes could lead to dangerous escalation that could put Americans based in the region in harm's way. Doubling down on economic pressure also has not produced results, except when paired with incentives to bring Iranians to the table in a negotiated agreement, such as the JCPOA. Indeed, a robust nuclear agreement that gives positive economic incentives to Iran is likely the only feasible way to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions.

With the JCPOA on life support following the U.S. withdrawal, the highest priority moving forward will be finding a way to either restore and build on the JCPOA or negotiate a new agreement with similarly stringent nuclear restrictions but for a longer time frame and with more guarantees for Iran that it will reap genuine economic benefits. Indeed, President Biden expressed his desire for the United States to rejoin the JCPOA if Iran returns to strict compliance with the agreement.[40] Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has similarly stated his support for a mutual return to the deal, although Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khaemenei's position is less clear and Rouhani faces domestic pressures against resumed diplomacy.[41] Iranians have been disappointed in Europe's inability to challenge the reimposition of U.S. sanctions, despite some efforts to open alternative channels to funnel humanitarian assistance into the country.[42] Given their experience with the Trump administration, Iranians might be cautious in returning to diplomacy, even if sanctions relief remains a high priority. The assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, further strengthened the resolve of Iranian hard-liners who are opposed to nuclear concessions.[43]

On the U.S. side, and increasingly in European circles, there are calls to strengthen the terms of the JCPOA, particularly the need to renegotiate sunset clauses and address such regional issues as missile development. Some Middle East partners have expressed opposition to a U.S. return to the JCPOA and would like the Biden administration

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[40] Joe Biden, "There's a Smarter Way to Be Tough on Iran," *CNN*, September 13, 2020.

[41] "Iran's Rouhani Attacks Domestic Critics Over Sanctions Relief," *Al-Monitor*, December 15, 2020.

[42] Ellie Geranmayeh and Manuel Lafont Rapnouil, "Meeting the Challenge of Secondary Sanctions," European Council on Foreign Relations, June 25, 2019.

[43] Golnaz Esfandiari, "Will Iranian Moderates' Attempt to Deal with Biden on Nuclear Agreement Be Sabotaged?" *Radio Free Europe*, December 5, 2020.

to consult with them and place a higher priority on Iran's regional activities.[44] But there is a strong possibility that the Iranians will not be interested in entering new negotiations with more demands when the original agreement failed to produce the anticipated benefits for them. They might, in fact, demand compensation for the losses incurred after the U.S. withdrawal, although that would likely be a political nonstarter for the Americans, and Rouhani has indicated that this would not be a precondition for returning to the deal.

Consequently, the most viable path forward would be a rapid return to compliance with the original terms of the JCPOA by both the United States and Iran, which would buy time for all sides to build on the agreement with a "more for more" formula—i.e., more assurances of economic relief for Iran and more assurances that the terms of the agreement would be extended and would open the door to discussions about regional areas of concern, but in an environment where the Iranian nuclear threat is contained.

An Iran strategy also needs a longer view that goes beyond the nuclear file. More than four decades of economic sanctions, along with military support for regional partners and increased U.S. force presence in the region, have not succeeded in curtailing Iran's regional activities, including its support of militant nonstate groups that threaten American personnel in the region. Because of Iran's own vulnerabilities, which we discussed earlier, including diminishing soft-power appeal and nationalist pushback even among its closer regional partners (such as Iraq), the optimal way to deflate Iran's regional influence is to leverage these weaknesses.

The situation is somewhat analogous to the Cold War, when containment of the Soviet Union was not just about direct confrontation or attempts at regime change. Containment was centered on the idea that rebuilding the capacity of European allies would demonstrate the superiority of the Western system and cast into sharp relief the shortcomings of the Soviet-ruled bloc. Containment was not about punishing the Soviets so much as it was about competing successfully for adoption of a superior governing model.

Although Cold War containment evolved into more-muscular approaches focused on military build-ups, and although Iran's capabilities are far more limited as a regional power than the threat posed by the Soviets during the Cold War, George Kennan's original conception of containment, which focused on blocking Soviet ideological expansion and "mellowing" its behavior over time, is relevant to U.S.-Iran policy.[45] Kennan's containment approach focused less on military build-ups and economic pressure and more on bolstering stable and vibrant power centers in Europe and Asia

[44] "Saudi FM: Biden Must Consult Gulf States on Rejoining Iran Nuclear Deal," *Times of Israel*, December 5, 2020.

[45] This discussion of containment of the Soviet Union and its applicability to Iran draws on Dalia Dassa Kaye and Eric Lorber, "Containing Iran: What Does it Mean?" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring 2012.

that would diminish the risk of Soviet subversion. Helping rebuild Western European countries through the Marshall Plan proved critical in thwarting Soviet influence. In other words, in Kennan's worldview, the economic development of allies was as important a component of containment as military deterrence. With these lessons in mind, U.S. support for economic reforms across the region and improved governance—which are key components of the overall strategy we outline in this report—can be critical elements in reducing the susceptibility of the region to Iranian influence.

In addition to this longer-term strategy of supporting regional reform to change the environment in which Iran operates, the United States also would benefit from direct engagement with Iran, even under the current system in which hostility to the United States is integral. The Soviet Union's anti-Western ideology, which thrived on confrontation and distrust of the outside world, did not prevent direct U.S.-Soviet dialogue throughout the Cold War, including diplomatic relations and, at times, negotiations to reduce the dangers of confrontation through arms control agreements. As the JCPOA demonstrated, the same is possible between the United States and Iran, although given the unique anti-American foundations of the Islamic Republic, diplomacy is most likely to succeed under the cover of multilateral forums.[46]

Finally, and in accordance with our wider strategic reassessment for the region, U.S. Iran policy needs to take Iran's people into account. It is possible to engage Iran's leaders diplomatically, as we did with the Soviets, while supporting the aspirations of the Iranian people who are looking for a better future. This is not to suggest a policy that supports regime change; the future nature of the Iranian government is not up to us but to the Iranian people. But we can support policies that can help Iranians and avoid policies that hurt them. The massive application of direct and secondary sanctions not only has fallen short of achieving policy goals; it has backfired by punishing average Iranians, undermining their purchasing power, and going so far as to impair their access to medical supplies.[47] Any review of U.S. sanctions policy would do well to consider these negative impacts.

Reversing other counterproductive policies, such as visa bans, which have prevented constructive student exchanges and have even separated families, are important first steps by the Biden administration and are likely to be welcomed by the Iranian people. Encouraging cultural and academic exchanges also could benefit future U.S.-Iran relations by improving communication channels and creating goodwill toward the United States among Iran's population. Supporting Iranians' ability to access online information through internet tools also is an important way to support civil society and

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[46] For further ideas on how to structure a U.S.-Iranian dialogue, see Goldenberg, Ewers, and Thomas, *Reengaging Iran: A New Strategy for the United States*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, August 4, 2020.

[47] For an assessment of the impact of sanctions on medical supplies and health care in Iran, see Human Rights Watch, "'Maximum Pressure:' U.S. Economic Sanctions Harm Iranians' Right to Health," webpage, October 29, 2019.

bolster critical viewpoints within the country. And perhaps most critically, the United States could continue shining a light on human rights abuses within Iran and support the release of political prisoners; human rights concerns cannot be swept under the rug because of fears that they might jeopardize nuclear or other regional agreements with Iran. Reviving American leadership on global human rights norms would contribute to U.S. credibility in pressing the Iranian government and, along with others in the international community, shining a spotlight on its repressive actions against its populace.

Addressing Shi'a Militias

A Second-Order Political-Military Threat

As discussed earlier, an important part of Iran's power- and influence-projection strategy is the creation and/or support of armed nonstate actors that often are collectively referred to as the Iranian Threat Network. These entities are highly varied nonstate actors that are funded, armed, trained, and, to a significant degree, directed by Iran's Quds Force. They vary from groups with high degrees of independence and their own political agendas to more-narrow proxy groups that are used primarily to augment Iranian military capacity. Iran, as part of its long-standing practice of political warfare, uses these groups in both offensive and defensive modes to undermine U.S. allies and partners, counter U.S. influence, extend its own range, and, when its interests dictate, attack U.S. military personnel in the region.[48] The specific interconnected threat posed by these groups has been to consolidate Iranian presence, influence, and routes for armed activity through Iraq, in Syria, and to the Lebanon-Israel border. In addition, militia activity threatens Saudi Arabia, most notably in the form of missile and drone attacks from Yemen.

The size, operational territories, and ties to Iran of the region's Shi'a militia groups are listed in Table 3.1.[49] Lebanese Hizballah (LH) is the oldest of these groups and one that has always practiced a wide array of armed, political, and social activities to further its cause. It has become a dominant political force in Lebanon, virtually a state within a state, but it receives funding from Iran and retains characteristics of a nonstate client or proxy of Iran.[50] LH operatives have been particularly valuable as Arabic-speaking

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[48] Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S. Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, and Katya Migacheva, *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1772-A, 2018 (see Chapter Four).

[49] Iranian support is not limited to Shi'a groups; for example, according to the U.S. State Department, Iran provides material support to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which primarily attacks Israel from Gaza (U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, Washington, D.C., June 2020c; specifically, see the section on Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza)

[50] R. Kim Cragin, "Semi-Proxy Wars and U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 5, 2015; Muhammad Faour, "Religion, Demography, and Politics in Lebanon," *Middle Eastern Stud-*

Table 3.1
Shi'a Militia Groups

Group Name	Estimated Strength	Country(ies) of Operation	Ties to Iran
Ansar Allah (Houthis)	20,000	Yemen	Before Yemen's civil war, Iran had provided limited support to the Houthis. Support increased in 2015, but "this relationship remains largely transactional." The Houthis "benefit from Iranian support, but do not want to be controlled by, reliant on, or beholden to their Iranian benefactors."[a]
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	10,000	Iraq, Syria	Strong ties to IRGC-QF and Iran
Badr Organization	18,000–22,000	Iraq	Strong ties to IRGC-QF and Iran
Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba	10,000	Iraq, Syria	Iran-aligned group within the PMU with ties to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq
Kata'ib Hizballah	10,000	Iraq, Syria	Kata'ib Hizballah "depends heavily on support from Iran."[b]
Lebanese Hizballah	20,000	Lebanon, Syria	Arguably Iran's primary proxy in the region, LH greatly benefits from Iranian financial and military support, and the two are ideologically aligned.
Liwa Fatimiyoun	10,000–20,000	Syria	Functions within the IRGC-QF's C2
Liwa Zeinabiyoun	2,000	Syria	Functions within the IRGC-QF's C2

SOURCES: Estimates of Shi'a militia groups' strengths are triangulated from the following sources: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index," blog, October 31, 2017; Lars Hauch, "Understanding the Fatemiyoun Division: Life Through the Eyes of a Militia Member," Middle East Institute, May 22, 2019; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020; Janes, "Hizbullah," webpage, undated-b; and Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 12, No. 7, August 2019.

NOTES: C2 = command and control. IRGC-QF = Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Quds Force. PMU = popular mobilization units.

[a] Johnston et al., 2020, p. 68.

[b] U.S. Department of State, 2020c, p. 281.

trainers of other nascent militia groups that Iran has sponsored and it has played a significant combat role in Syria to support the Assad regime. The Houthis (also called Ansar Allah) in Yemen are other distinctive members of this group, although they were not created by Iran and do not share the same religious or ideological commitments. Iran's support to the Houthis primarily provides it a means to confront Saudi Arabia in the Arabian peninsula, although analysts note that it provides Iran another perch from which to conduct maritime operations in the Gulf via the strategic chokepoint of Bab al-Mandab.[51] The Houthis have proven to be agile and adaptive in their objective of seeking power in Yemen.

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ies, Vol. 43, No. 6, November 2007.

51 Johnston et al., 2020.

Perhaps the most closely controlled elements of the Iranian Threat Network are the Fatimiyoun and Zeinabiyoun, which recruited from Shiʻa Afghans and Pakistanis who migrated to Iran.[52] Formally part of Iran's Quds Force, they have been employed to fight in Syria's civil war on behalf of the Assad regime. Finally, a plethora of Shiʻa militias have sprung up in Iraq since 2003 to gain influence and contest the U.S. presence. The oldest of these, the Badr Organization, has taken a similar political path to that of LH, becoming a significant Iraqi party that leads a parliamentary bloc and controls Iraq's interior ministry. The groups of greatest concern, which have been sanctioned by the U.S. government and implicated in attacks on Americans, are Kata'ib Hizballah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba. The growing presence, clout, and cross-border reach of these militias caused grave concern in Iraq, Jordan, the Gulf states, and the U.S. security establishment as they dug into key border areas of Iraq and Syria, extorted resident populations, and exercised substantial (although not majority) influence in Baghdad.[53]

The Effectiveness of U.S. Policy Measures

The U.S. government has applied an increasing array of sanctions targeting the aforementioned Shiʻa militia groups and their leaders, including the State Department's designation of the IRGC (including the Quds Force) as an FTO in 2019, as mentioned earlier. No entity of a state government had been so designated previously. These measures have not reined in the designated groups, as previously noted. The killing of Qassem Soleimani, who was known as the architect of the proxy strategy, created shock waves—and discontent in Baghdad because of the unilateral nature of the strike. A largely symbolic vote in Parliament requested the U.S. withdrawal from the country. In practical terms, given Soleimani's personal clout within the Iranian regime and leading role guiding militias on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, the effects of his death on the Iranian Threat Network likely will be felt for some time. Iran's ability to supply arms, funds, and support to these groups also has been reduced by the sanctions, but the militias remain a vital tool in Iran's arsenal.

The direct threat to U.S. forces from militias has waxed and waned; particularly during the 2006–2008 surge in Iraq, Iranian-backed groups, armed with "explosively formed projectiles" fabricated in Iran, killed 603 U.S. troops in Iraq, according to the

[52] These migrants to Iran were hired to fight in Syria and were largely drawn by the financial incentives offered (Sirwan Kajjo, Mohammad Habibzada, and Mehdi Jedinia, "Returning from Syria, Iranian-Backed Afghan Fighters Could Pose Threat," *Voice of America News*, April 8, 2019).

[53] Colin Clarke and Phillip Smyth, "The Implications of Iran's Expanding Shi'a Foreign Fighter Network," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 10, No. 10, November 2017; Brandon Friedman, "Iran's Hezbollah Model in Iraq and Syria: Fait Accompli?" *Orbis*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2018. It should be noted that other Shiʻa militia groups formed to protect mosques during the ISIS onslaught and responded to the Shiʻa Supreme Ayatollah's call to defend Iraq without the same reliance on or affiliation with Iran.

U.S. military tally.[54] During the 2014–2019 operation to eject the Islamic State caliphate from Iraq and Syria, the militias and the U.S.-led coalition operated warily, but with little direct conflict, and at times with formal deconfliction mediated through the Iraqi government. Under Iranian guidance, Shiʿa militia groups converged with U.S.-advised forces in Syria as each sought to control territory and border crossings liberated from ISIS.

However, attacks by Shiʿa militia groups escalated in 2019, as the United States and Israel began targeting the groups' bases, arms depots, and rocket launch sites in Iraq and Syria. In a tit-for-tat escalation, Shiʿa militia groups increased their mortar and rocket attacks on bases where U.S. troops were training and advising Iraqis. The increasingly powerful militias reportedly launched attacks from Iraq on Saudi Arabia.[55] The escalation culminated in the U.S. strike on January 3, 2020, that killed Soleimani as he deplaned and boarded a vehicle at the Baghdad International Airport. Also killed was a close Iraqi associate, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of the strongest Iraqi militia, Kata'ib Hizballah. Even this dramatic event did not halt the Iraqi militia from shelling bases where U.S. forces were housed; in fact, as noted earlier, it caused retaliatory missile strikes from Iran. In response, the United States steadily concentrated its presence on a few bases and then, in fall 2020, drew down to a residual force of 3,000 service members.

A Holistic Approach

Iran and the Shiʿa militias it backs have persisted in their destabilizing and retaliatory actions despite the U.S. use of direct force. The escalation over 2020 demonstrated that the likeliest outcome of further escalation would be U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, either by choice or by the invitation of the Iraqi government, which repeatedly stressed its desire not to become a battleground between the two countries. This "with us or against us" formula would not favor the United States because Iraq seeks to maintain normal trade, investment and other ties with Iran on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty. Given the delicate position of the Iraqi government, a parliamentary system beset by multiple demands and critical economic crisis, the only solutions that are likely to be found are gradual ones.

The most effective means for containing the destabilization caused by Shiʿa militia groups is to bolster legitimate security forces in those areas, including the Iraqi security forces and the Lebanese armed forces, through continued security cooperation that enables those forces to conduct independent operations. In addition to providing support to the Iraqi army, recent efforts to support the professionalization of Iraq's interior

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[54] Alex Horton, "Soleimani's Legacy: The Gruesome, Advanced IEDs That Haunted U.S. Troops in Iraq," *Washington Post*, January 3, 2020; Kyle Rempfer, "Iran Killed More U.S. Troops in Iraq Than Previously Known, Pentagon Says," *Military Times*, April 4, 2019.

[55] "Iraqi Shi'a Militias Call for Terror Attacks in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Monitor*, May 26, 2020.

ministry, its police forces, and border guards are especially important in countering and displacing the militia presence, both at critical border crossings and in sensitive and strategic areas in Sunni-majority provinces. This long-term approach to enabling Iraq to defend its territory and secure its population from internal and external threats will take both time and a firm Iraqi commitment to increasing the professionalization of its security institutions, combating corruption, and ensuring that Iran does not exercise de facto control of armed elements.

Demobilizing the Iraqi militias and inducting competent members into professionalized forces or other vocations must be part of the long-term plan if Iraq is to escape the Hizballah-ization of its security forces. To accelerate this demobilization, a renewed U.S. diplomatic process with Iran could include direct engagement to seek a halt to its funding, arming, and training of these militia groups to stem their regional destabilization.

A third line of effort would take account of the political-military characteristics of many of these "semi-proxies" and, over a longer horizon, seek to strengthen good governance, competitive party politics, and economic opportunity in the relevant countries to decrease the recruiting appeal of Shiʻa militia groups. Following the devastating 2020 chemical explosion in Beirut, demonstrations featured unprecedented criticism of LH, which also has been criticized for aiding the repressive Assad regime in Syria. To the degree that LH and other political-military militias seek power through politics, their failings, divided loyalties, and unpopular policies constitute significant liabilities. This phenomenon of increasing anti-Iranian sentiment was also evident in Iraq over prolonged demonstrations in 2019 and 2020 in which Iranian consulates were burned and protestors denounced Iranian-backed armed actors.

One analysis suggests that the Iranian Threat Network—and, specifically, its employment in Syria—has proven to be a costly endeavor for Iran, potentially creating an opening to reverse the accelerants of and trend toward greater conflict.[56] The strategy Iran employs is a political-competitive one that should be answered by supporting a superior political option for the resident populations. In Lebanon, that might take the form of supporting reforms to the country's confessional system of representation, supporting the development of competitive but nonsectarian political parties, and encouraging the civil-society organizations that constitute an important part of the social fabric.

Anti-corruption measures that are tied to foreign assistance also can bolster trust in public institutions. Over time, a more-representative and -responsive political system can reduce the sway currently exerted by Hizballah and rein in its approach to armed politics. The same prescription applies to Iraq, which we discuss later, where urgently needed measures to reduce corruption and respond to public needs will bolster the

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[56] Thomas Juneau, "Iran's Costly Intervention in Syria: A Pyrrhic Victory," *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2020.

parties who champion those reforms, growing the democratic space and reducing the space for Shi'a armed politics and the Sunni grievances that could give rise to a resurgence of ISIS.

Syria: Mitigating the Damage

The Regime Consolidates Control

Thanks to Russian and Iranian support, the Syrian regime has progressively consolidated control over much of its territory since 2015. As of late 2020, several hundred U.S. forces continued to support Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast Syria, while Turkey-backed forces continued to hold off the regime in Idlib and occupy a slice of the border that it had occupied with the blessing of the United States in October 2019. U.S.-backed forces also hold a small outpost, Al Tanf Garrison, in southern Syria, where the United States supported partner operations to stem ISIS fighters filtering out of the Euphrates Valley and prevent their infiltration into Jordan. The area has become increasingly contested by Russian and Iranian forces, and the benefits provided by this presence are negligible. Israel regularly strikes Iranian positions in Syria that it deems threatening. Jordan has reopened its border to commerce, and Gulf states have made overtures to Damascus as Assad's hold on power continues.

Ineffective U.S. Policies

Although the war might be winding down, the suffering it has caused continues apace. The human cost of the civil war has been extraordinarily high, with 585,000 deaths and more than half of the population (12 million) displaced; moreover, the country's GDP has declined by 75 percent, with more than 70 percent of Syrians living in extreme poverty. Two consecutive U.S. administrations have failed to bring peace to Syria or stop chemical weapons attacks and other war crimes. The civil war created a vacuum that allowed ISIS to flourish. A significant secondary effect of the war was the mass outflow of more than one million Syrians to Europe in 2015, which fueled a wave of populist, anti-immigrant electoral victories and deeply divided the European Union.[57] Although Syria might not have been the priority of either administration, the ongoing conflict has affected U.S. interests and allowed a further entrenchment of Iranian and Russian presence.

Both the Obama and Trump administrations supported the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, which seeks to end the conflict through a new constitution and elections that would presumably pave the way for Assad's exit. Russian and Chinese vetoes at the security council and a rival Astana process to the United

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[57] Phillip Connor, "Most Displaced Syrians Are in the Middle East, and About a Million Are in Europe," *Fact-tank*, January 29, 2018.

Nations Geneva talks have stymied progress,[58] although some analysts hold out hope that Russia will tire of supporting Assad and pressure him to make concessions. Russia, however, has gained increased stature and basing rights through its successful intervention to shore up the regime. By contrast, the United States has failed to budge Assad and has instead upped the ante with increasingly maximalist aims—without commensurate investment to achieve them. Indeed, in early 2018, the administration expanded its objectives to demand that all Iranian and Iranian-backed forces leave Syria.[59]

These maximalist aims, particularly the removal of all Iranian forces from Syria, have not been backed by any effective means to achieve them. In fact, the Trump administration signaled its waning interest by repeatedly announcing its intent to withdraw all forces from Syria. An abrupt withdrawal threatened to undo gains from the successful military operations to dislodge ISIS and undermine efforts by the SDF to prevent ISIS reemergence in eastern Syria. Russian intervention bolstered Assad's faltering fortunes, and Iranian forces remain entrenched in Syria as U.S. forces draw down. Iranian and Russian influence in Syria, and within its armed forces, remains strong, as Table 3.2 indicates, and Iranian support to Syria and foreign proxy forces there continues.

Diplomacy to resolve the civil war also failed as Assad steadily reconquered territory with Russian and Iranian help. A political resolution to the war appeared to be a distant prospect given the lack of incentives to prod the glacial United Nations–backed Geneva process. The Assad regime agreed to form a Constitutional Committee in 2019, but after more than a year, only one meeting was held, and the parties include "neutral" civil-society representatives that are skewed toward the regime that selected them.

U.S. vacillation on a troop presence in Syria undermined the tenuous situation in eastern Syria and cast doubt on the reliability of the United States as an ally.[60] Even before the U.S.-supported SDF finished a grueling and bloody six-year campaign to eject ISIS from eastern Syria, President Trump announced his intent to withdraw the U.S. advisory forces supporting the SDF. This was later walked back, and some 700 troops remained in eastern and southern Syria as of late 2020. However, 2,000 foreign ISIS fighters remained in northeast Syria under the precarious control of the SDF, which has beseeched their countries of origin to repatriate them and tens of thousands of their family members, who are languishing in fetid camps. Another group of some 9,000 Iraqi and Syrian ISIS fighters were under the control of the SDF, which began to

[58] In 2017, Russia launched the Astana Format, which is named after the capital of Kazakhstan and through which it began talks with Turkey and Iran to discuss the dynamics of the Syria conflict.

[59] U.S. Department of State, "Briefing with Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James Jeffrey: An Update on Syria," briefing, August 13, 2020d.

[60] The senior U.S. military commander in the region, General Joseph Votel, voiced these concerns before and after his retirement. See Joseph Votel and Elizabeth Dent, "The Danger of Abandoning Our Partners," *The Atlantic*, October 8, 2019.

Table 3.2
Syria and Regime-Aligned Forces

Branch or Group Name	Estimated Strength	Degree of Iranian Influence
Army	130,000	Mixed; Russia exerts more influence on the Syrian Army than Iran does. The IRGC-QF does exert influence on some paramilitary elements integrating into the Army.
Navy	4,000	Unknown
Air Force	15,000	Limited; Russia exerts more influence on the Syrian Air Force than Iran does
Air Defense Command	20,000	Limited; Russia exerts more influence on the Syrian Air Defense Command than Iran does
National Defense Force and other paramilitary elements	50,000–100,000[a]	High; IRGC-QF helped raise loyalist militias and has provided training and material support

SOURCES: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020; Anton Mardasov, "Why Russia's Grip on Syrian Military Is Weaker Than it Seems," *Al-Monitor*, April 22, 2020; Chris Zambelis, "Institutionalized 'Warlordism': Syria's National Defense Force," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 15, No. 6, March 24, 2017.

[a] *The Military Balance 2020* estimates the Syrian National Defense Force's strength to be around 50,000, constituting the lower bound (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020); however, other reports, such as the Royal United Services Institute's 2016 work, claimed that the IRGC-QF helped the Assad regime recruit 100,000 fighters (Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, eds., *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, Washington, D.C.: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, August 2016, p. 4). Moreover, the IRGC-QF is actively recruiting in southern and eastern areas that were formerly under the Syrian opposition's control, reportedly recruiting upwards of 9,000 new fighters since at least 2019. Some of these fighters will incorporate into the National Defense Force, while others might incorporate into the Army's 4th Armored Division (see "Iran Forces Recruit 9,000 Shi'a Fighters in Syria," *Middle East Monitor*, March 17, 2020; Sirwan Kajjo and Mehdi Jedinia, "Report: Iran Forming All-Syrian Militia in Syria," *Voice of America News*, March 2, 2019; and Kirill Semenov, "Clashes Between U.S., Regime Forces Present New Challenges for Russia in Syria," *Al-Monitor*, August 25, 2020).

release some of the latter to local Syrian tribes on their own recognizance. In addition to this unresolved and dangerous situation of ISIS detainees, the small U.S. contingent in northeast Syria faced a steady and increasing drumbeat of confrontations with the Russian forces, which moved into the area to help the regime assert control over the territory—and, particularly, its vital oil fields. The U.S. government moved armored units into Syria to help protect the remaining U.S. troops and deny ISIS efforts to regain control of oil fields, but it did not map a clear path to de-escalate these tensions or address the remaining ISIS threat.

Containment and Conflict Mitigation

Few good options exist for changing the grim dynamic that has driven Syria's tragedy. Reports in early 2020 of Russia pressuring Assad appear to be largely wishful thinking;[61] although Russia faces long-term stresses, it has gained valuable basing

61 Alexander Bick, *Assad the Spoiler: Russia's Challenge in Syria*, Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center, April 30, 2020.

rights, strengthened its presence in the eastern Mediterranean, and heightened its profile in the region. Also, a consensus does not exist in the United States for increasing U.S. involvement to achieve a solution to the Syrian civil war. However, capitulation to Assad, recognition of the regime, sanctions relief, and offers of reconstruction aid are not warranted without major concessions by the regime.

In the interim, there are several steps that the U.S. government can take to contain and mitigate the threats in Syria. First, to mitigate the human suffering caused by the war, the United States can maintain and, as needed, increase humanitarian assistance and engage Turkey to minimize the prospect of a massive refugee outflow from Idlib, the last bastion of the opposition, where an estimated one million displaced persons are crowded into the already packed province. Diplomatic pressure could be escalated to reverse Russia's and China's vote to limit the United Nations to a single humanitarian access point on the Turkey-Syria border.

Second, the U.S. presence supporting the SDF in northeast Syria could be maintained to bolster the SDF's prospects to provide stability over the longer term in places where it has the majority and has declared an Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria in hopes of gaining limited autonomy from Damascus. Third, the U.S. State Department could elevate efforts to persuade all countries to accept the repatriation of ISIS detainees to forestall the catastrophic scenario of a mass prison break that would allow ISIS to reconstitute.

Finally, the United States could maintain the Caesar Act sanctions that were implemented in 2020; they ratchet up the pressure on the Assad regime and entities that support it. Maintaining these sanctions, in combination with Russian pressure, might eventually galvanize progress toward new elections and germinate an exit strategy for Assad, but there is little sign of that happening any time soon. It is just as likely that the threat of prosecution for war crimes, although highly justified, might cause Assad to cling to power at all costs. Therefore, maintaining sanctions can be coupled with a new overture to seek concessions that will address the plight of millions of Syrians in exchange for the promise of eventual sanctions relief.

The most significant remaining source of leverage the United States has to influence Syrian outcomes is the promise of reconstruction assistance. This assistance, coupled with selective sanctions relief, might be offered conditionally to induce specific concessions from the regime, including the shoring up of the Idlib ceasefire, the cessation of aerial bombing, the free flow of humanitarian assistance, an unimpeded return of refugees, localized interim governing arrangements, and an expansion of representation on the constitutional committee. Direct negotiations with the Assad regime are not advisable, but the Geneva and Astana venues could be more-closely linked to pursue these interim steps.[62] The Trump administration engaged directly with the

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[62] Mona Yacoubian, "The Best Hope for Sustained De-Escalation in Syria," United States Institute for Peace, November 18, 2020.

regime in secret talks to seek the release of U.S. hostages, but the Biden administration would be better served by using existing multilateral processes to avoid rewarding a regime that has been deeply implicated in war crimes.[63] Although Russian assistance in meeting the common goals of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 in Syria would be welcome, such a combined effort should not be incentivized by concessions on other issues, such as Russian sanctions.

The Sunni Extremist Threat

A Diminishing Threat from ISIS and Al Qaeda

ISIS has posed the dominant extremist threat to the United States and the Middle East since 2014. The core of ISIS established a caliphate extending through almost half of Syria and one-third of Iraq in 2014. A multinational coalition led by the United States mounted a five-year effort from 2014 to 2020, called Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), to dislodge ISIS through a variety of measures, most notably by supporting Iraqi security forces and a variety of Syrian opposition forces that were largely funded through the CTEF at a cost of $5.6 billion.[64] This sum, although large, was a fraction of the cost of the previous Operation Iraqi Freedom ($815 billion), in which U.S. troops and coalition forces engaged in direct combat operations.[65] In OIR, U.S. forces eschewed combat but provided airstrikes, advisory support, training, equipping, and intelligence, along with limited direct counterterrorism action. U.S. troop casualties in OIR were limited (21 deaths because of hostile action and 231 wounded in action) compared with 3,481 combat deaths and 31,994 wounded in action during Operation Iraqi Freedom.[66]

In 2018, U.S. intelligence assessed that "ISIS still commands thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria," and retained the ability to "threaten local and regional U.S. interests."[67] The threat had further diminished in 2019, with sporadic attacks in eastern Syria and the so-called seam areas of Iraq's five conflict-affected provinces, but civilian deaths declined by almost half between 2018 and 2019, according to the U.S.

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63 Richard Pérez-Peña, "High-Level U.S. Mission to Syria Sought Release of American Prisoners," *New York Times*, October 19, 2020.

64 Office of the Inspector General, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2019–March 31, 2019*, Washington, D.C., May 7, 2019.

65 Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, December 8, 2014.

66 Defense Casualty Analysis System, "Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) Casualty Summary by Casualty Category," data set, undated.

67 Daniel R. Coats, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 13, 2018, pp. 11, 10. The 2019 version of this annual report was neither presented to Congress nor made public.

State Department's annual terrorism report.[68] Sleeper cells and supporters are still present, and some 1.4 million displaced Sunni Iraqis might become a fertile recruiting ground if they are not able to find homes and livelihoods. The underlying causes of marginalization and sectarian strife remain and indeed are exacerbated by Syria's state collapse and Iraq's weak government, which is rife with corruption, bureaucracy, and statist economic policies dating back to the Baathist dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

U.S. intelligence assesses that ISIS is primarily a threat to U.S. interests in the region and that the most "acute Sunni terrorist" threat is homegrown violent extremism motivated by online ISIS propaganda.[69] ISIS was notable for the number of foreign fighters it attracted to fight and live in the caliphate and for spawning several affiliates in the Middle East and beyond. U.S. intelligence estimated that as many as 40,000 foreign fighters joined ISIS in Iraq and Syria at the height of the war.[70] ISIS's eight branches included those in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, of which the first two were deemed the strongest. Ongoing civil war in Libya and Yemen create propitious conditions for ISIS to retain a sanctuary.

The largest concentration of ISIS fighters remain in the core areas of Iraq and Syria, and, thus, the fate of the core organization likely will have a significant impact on the affiliates, all of which are much smaller and less well organized. Table 3.3 lists the size and operational territories of some of those affiliates and whether they have been designated as FTOs.

The core of Al Qaeda has become inactive, according to U.S. intelligence, and the director of the National Counterterrorism Center wrote in September 2020 that

Table 3.3
ISIS and Its Regional Affiliates

Group Name	Estimated Strength	Country(ies) of Operation	Designated FTO?
ISIS (Core)	11,000–18,000	Iraq, Syria	Yes
ISIS-Libya	100	Libya	Yes
ISIS-Sinai	800–1,200	Egypt	Yes
ISIS-Yemen	100	Yemen	Yes

SOURCES: Estimates of ISIS affiliates' strength are drawn from the following sources: Elisabeth Kendall, "ISIS in Yemen: Caught in a Regional Power Game," Center for Global Policy, July 21, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2020c; and Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Islamic State in Libya Has Yet to Recover," Washington Institute of Near East Policy, December 6, 2019.

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[68] U.S. Department of State, 2020c. See also Office of the Inspector General, *Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, April 1, 2020–June 30, 2020*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, August 4, 2020, p. 22.

[69] Coats, 2018, p. 12; the report also states that "the frequency of attacks most likely will be very low compared to most other forms of criminal violence in the U.S" (p. 12). See also Office of the Inspector General, 2020, p. 21.

[70] U.S. Department of State, 2020c (particularly the Foreword).

the defeat of Al Qaeda was in sight. He described a transition to managing terrorism through "allowing like-minded partners to take the lead" with U.S. training and intelligence support.[71] Al Qaeda's Yemen affiliate, which is known as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, historically was the primary affiliate demonstrating intent and capability to attack the U.S. homeland in several foiled plots, but as the other affiliates have, it has mostly focused on local conflicts since mid-2015.[72] Table 3.4 lists the strength, operational locations, and FTO status of Al Qaeda's regional affiliates.

The U.S. Policy Track Record

As noted earlier, the signature accomplishment of U.S. policy across two administrations has been the destruction of the physical ISIS caliphate through a novel, large-scale operation by partner forces in Iraq and Syria. However, this *military* defeat of ISIS does not necessarily constitute an *enduring* defeat, as U.S. and coalition military commanders have warned. Follow-on actions by Iraq, the birthplace of ISIS, to stabilize and rebuild the country will be needed to prevent a resurgence of conflict. The abrupt cessation of U.S. support and the withdrawal of all forces, as occurred in 2011, could undermine chances for enduring stability. Al Qaeda in the Middle East region poses a marginal external threat, but the former Al Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, remains the most robust armed group fighting the Syrian regime. The threat posed by other external Al Qaeda and ISIS affiliates is also small at present, but U.S. efforts to develop capable partner forces in Yemen and Libya to contain or defeat terrorists are limited to the civil wars and to the involvement of external states in those conflicts.

Beyond the U.S. track record in specific countries, it is important to evaluate the overall U.S. approach to FTOs over the past two decades. Throughout most of

Table 3.4
Al Qaeda and Its Regional Affiliates

Group Name	Estimated Strength	Country(ies) of Operation	Designated FTO?
Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	3,000–7,000	Yemen, Saudi Arabia	Yes
Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb	1,000	Algeria, Libya	Yes
Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham	5,000–10,000	Syria	Yes
Hurras al-Din	1,500–2,000	Syria	No

SOURCES: Estimates of Al Qaeda affiliates' strength are triangulated from the following sources: Janes, "AQIM," webpage, undated-a; United Nations Security Council, "Letter Dated 16 July 2018 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council," Geneva, S/2018/705, July 27, 2018; and U.S. Department of State, 2020c.

[71] Christopher Miller, "The End of the War on al-Qaeda Is Well in Sight," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2020.

[72] Coats, 2018, p. 10.

that time, U.S. counterterrorism strategy has, in practice, focused heavily on leadership decapitation and network suppression via direct action and partnered operations. Research suggests that such an approach provides mostly ephemeral results and that well-organized movements tend to replace leaders and key facilitators with relative ease.[73] An additional element of counterterrorism policy, the expedient use of surrogate forces to prosecute direct action raids, might have fared little better in producing definitive results because these efforts did not build lasting capability.[74] However, the evidence does suggest that a longer-term approach to building professional partner forces that are capable of sustained, independent operations has paid off, producing enduring results in such cases as Colombia, the Counter-Terrorism Service in Iraq, and in some Afghan special units.[75] Pursuing the latter model in countries where adequate government oversight exists increases the chances of lasting operational success; this type of security cooperation can be a component of an effective approach.

However, many U.S. commanders have come to recognize that military tools alone cannot achieve strategic success.[76] The larger realization that has begun to dawn on policymakers after almost 20 years of the "war on terror" is that military means cannot achieve defeat; both the means and the objective are mistaken. Terrorism is not in essence a military phenomenon, and it is not likely to be extinguished. Continuous industrial-strength counterterrorism operations do not alter the essentially ephemeral nature of the results. The major intellectual failing of U.S. counterterrorism policy could be traced to the lack of appropriate and effective measures to address the drivers

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73 Patrick B. Johnston, "Does Decapitation Work? Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Targeting in Counterinsurgency Campaigns," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Spring 2012; Jenna Jordan, "When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation," *Security Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2009, pp. 719–755; Austin Long, "Whack-a-Mole or Coup de Grace? Institutionalization and Leadership Targeting in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Security Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2014.

74 The classified nature of these operations has impeded independent analysis for public consumption. See Chapter Ten of Linda Robinson, Austin Long, Kimberly Jackson, and Rebeca Orrie, *Improving the Understanding of Special Operations: A Case History Analysis*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2026-A, 2018, for a description of the Section 1208 (now 10 U.S.C., § 127e) program to support counterterrorism partners. This program is a permanent authority, but no comprehensive public evaluation of its effectiveness has been conducted.

75 Austin Long, Todd C. Helmus, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Christopher M. Schnaubelt, and Peter Chalk, *Building Special Operations Partnerships in Afghanistan and Beyond: Challenges and Best Practices from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-713-OSD, 2015; Linda Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1290-OSD, 2016. Additional forthcoming RAND research established the effectiveness of some partner development efforts in OIR in Iraq, including the Counter-Terrorism Service but not limited to counterterrorism units.

76 RAND researchers have recently conducted in-depth interviews with senior and mid-level commanders and policymakers who served through the duration of OIR, and this judgment represented one of the most consistent views expressed by these 79 officials. Also see the public remarks made in United States Institute of Peace, "How ISIS Really Ends: The Road to Violent Extremist Disengagement and Reconciliation Featuring USCENTCOM Commander General Kenneth McKenzie," video, August 12, 2020.

that create and sustain terrorist groups by providing a ready pool of recruits energized by grievances and anomie. The United States veered from overspending on massive stabilization programs in Operation Iraqi Freedom to marginal and episodic spending during OIR.[77] A more effective approach would be to invest in targeted nonmilitary programs to deter and discourage those who would join these movements and create viable pathways to jobs and advancement. Significant potential exists to achieve results in Iraq through locally focused stabilization assistance now, while ISIS is weak and discredited.[78] This might prove to be a fleeting window of opportunity to consolidate gains through rebuilding in the wake of ISIS's brutal campaign and widespread signs of its rejection by the populations of the Middle East.[79]

Civil Wars That Create Conditions for Terrorism

The conflicts in Yemen and Libya are primarily civil wars, but are complicated by the involvement of regional and global actors. These fragile states are wracked by deprivation, factionalism, and, in the case of Yemen, severe famine. Such hardships and instability provide fertile conditions in which terrorist groups can find safe haven and recruits. Diplomatic efforts to halt fierce fighting in Libya bore no fruit during the Obama administration, and the conflict worsened under the Trump administration as the warring parties gained additional powerful outside support. Following a Turkish-backed offensive to support the government in Tripoli, the leveling of the playing field created a momentary opportunity in which diplomacy carried out under United Nations auspices achieved a ceasefire in Libya in October 2020.[80] U.S. support will be essential to fostering a diplomatic resolution to the conflict, which should include the departure of all foreign forces. Along the way, enforcement of the arms embargo might require stiff actions against friendly governments, such as the UAE and Turkey.[81]

Similarly, U.S. support for United Nations–led diplomacy in Yemen, including pressure on Saudi Arabia to take steps that are conducive to a satisfactory negotiated solution that protects Saudi territory from Houthi and Al Qaeda attacks, will be important to resolve that conflict.[82] The U.S. Congress has demonstrated a growing

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[77] Linda Robinson, Sean Mann, Jeffrey Martini, and Stephanie Pezard, *Finding the Right Balance: Department of Defense Roles in Stabilization*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2441-OSD, 2018.

[78] Shelly Culbertson and Linda Robinson, *Making Victory Count After Defeating ISIS: Stabilization Challenges in Mosul and Beyond*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2076-RC, 2017.

[79] See, for example, Gilles Kepel, *Away from Chaos: The Middle East and the Challenge to the West*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020.

[80] Nick Cumming-Bruce and Declan Walsh, "Libya Cease-Fire Raises Hopes for Full Peace Deal," *New York Times*, October 23, 2020.

[81] Edith M. Lederer, "UN Demands All Countries Enforce UN Arms Embargo on Libya," Associated Press, September 16, 2020.

[82] Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Saudis Seek Buffer Zone with Yemen in Return for Ceasefire—Sources," Reuters, November 17, 2020; Daniel Egel and Trevor Johnston, "Yemen's Chaos Creates New Opportunity for Biden-Harris

bipartisan consensus to cease arms sales to Saudi Arabia for use in Yemen, and one of President Biden's first acts was to cease such sales.[83] These examples of U.S. support of multilateral diplomacy, backed by pressure and incentives, represent the type of active diplomacy that can achieve results without reliance on military means. These festering conflicts will not be resolved overnight, but the combined U.S. approach of humanitarian assistance and active diplomatic engagement will improve the odds of success at a manageable cost over a policy of disengagement.

Promoting Long-Term Stability in Iraq, an Important Pivot Point in the Region

The case for sustained support to Iraq extends beyond the merits of an enduring defeat of ISIS; it rests even more on Iraq's importance within the Middle East. Iraq is the largest Shi'a Arab majority country, sitting next to Iran, with significant oil resources and human capital. The United States cannot guarantee its success, but it will reap the benefits of Iraq's emergence as a stable government that increasingly uses its resources to address its population's needs and provides a natural bridge between the Arab and Persian and Sunni and Shi'a populations of the region. A long-term vision of the region does not overlook the challenges to the country but also factors in the substantial potential gains for the region if Iraq can emerge from its successive crises.

Iraq has arrived at a critical juncture following a long battle to dislodge the most powerful terrorist organization ever to amass quasi-state power over such a large territory. Three steps—continuing noncombat security cooperation, incentivizing anticorruption and basic services reforms, and supporting structural reforms—can greatly increase the chances that ISIS will not resurge and that similar groups will not find ready breeding ground in Iraq, which was the cradle of ISIS, with civil war–wracked Syria as its primary sanctuary.[84]

Continue Noncombat Security Cooperation

First, as the U.S. and coalition troop presence draws down, a small footprint of troops could continue a noncombat security cooperation program to provide ongoing advisory and mentoring services to help the Iraqi security forces address several chronic weaknesses in logistics, intelligence, and air support, in addition to professionalizing its police forces and building civilian defense institutions. The Iraqi prime minister rightly noted that the time for U.S. combat support has ended; sufficient combat power now exists in Iraqi forces.[85] But the security cooperation mission, combined with other

Team," The National Interest, November 22, 2020.

[83] Mark Landler and Peter Baker, "Trump Vetoes Measure to Force End to U.S. Involvement in Yemen War," *New York Times*, April 16, 2019.

[84] Linda Robinson, "Winning the Peace in Iraq: Don't Give Up on Baghdad's Fragile Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2019.

[85] The White House, "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi of the Republic of Iraq Before Bilateral Meeting," statement, August 20, 2020a.

assistance, can ensure that Iraq finds its way to lasting peace and independence from Iranian interference. This is not a burden that the United States must shoulder alone. The NATO Mission Iraq and the European Union Assistance Mission plan to continue assisting in the latter roles, which will permit a smaller U.S. commitment. Multiple studies on best practices in security cooperation emphasize that building institutional capacity is essential for professional security forces and civilian governance and oversight.[86]

Incentivize Anticorruption and Basic Services Reforms

The second step is to support the overall progress of the Iraqi government by incentivizing the needed reforms to reduce rampant corruption and remedy woeful services, such as water and electricity, in a country that possesses the world's fifth-largest crude oil reserves. These deficits in governance are the most important drivers of conflict in Iraq today. Major sustained protests swept the country over the past two years that were motivated by these grievances, which, if they are not remedied, pose the most-severe threat to Iraqi stability. The political system is held hostage to a patronage system and chronic gridlock, which have prevented its parliament from resolving long-standing disputes and delivering basic services to the population. Its statist rentier economy fails to produce sufficient jobs and opportunities for private enterprise. These critical reforms can be incentivized through conditionality, by incorporating agreed benchmarks into U.S. bilateral assistance as part of the reinvigorated Strategic Framework Agreement.

Support Structural Reforms

In addition, the U.S. government could support an appeal from Iraq's government to provide policy support to help Iraq through the financial crises occasioned by plummeting oil prices, which create extraordinary pressure on Iraq's budget at a time when the country can little afford additional pressure. Iraq has sought a medium-term Extended Fund Facility loan from the International Monetary Fund to manage its balance of payments crisis. In a visit to Washington, Iraq's finance minister made a public appeal for the United States to require, as part of its support for this loan, a set of structural reforms, including economic and political management, which the minister recognized as essential for a functioning government.[87] This rare admission from a government that conditionality is needed to overcome the ingrained corruption and patronage that holds Iraq hostage should be taken as the plea for help that it is. U.S.

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[86] The importance of these institution-building and interest-alignment requirements are highlighted in Christopher Paul, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Beth Grill, Colin P. Clarke, Lisa Saum-Manning, Heather Peterson, and Brian J. Gordon, *What Works Best When Building Partner Capacity in Challenging Contexts?* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-937-OSD, 2015; and Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, Beth Grill, Stephanie Young, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Joe Hogler, and Christine Leah, *What Works Best When Building Partner Capacity and Under What Circumstances?* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1253/1-OSD, 2013.

[87] Atlantic Council, "A Conversation with H. E. Ali Allawi and H. E. Fuad Hussein," video, August 21, 2020.

insistence on fundamental reforms via this route have a greater chance of succeeding because of a published plan by the Finance Ministry and important political allies in Iraq's normally fractious parliament. The gravity of the present crisis has created mounting pressure for serious action.

U.S. and international support for Iraq at this critical juncture—support that is tied to specific financial, economic, and political reforms—is justified based on the country's potential to become a stabilizing rather than a destabilizing element over the longer term. Treating Iraq as synonymous with ISIS or, in more-recent policy framing, as controlled by Iran, overlooks the population's rejection of both ISIS and domination by Iran. Moreover, the development of functional institutions and reduction of corruption will enable the country to use its significant resources to address its population's needs and harness the substantial human and material resources that are lacking in many other conflict-ridden countries of the region.

An Effective Approach to Countering Violent Extremism in the Region

Continuing the work of the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS will provide important collective support from 82 regional and international members to ensure that the hard-won defeat of ISIS is converted into long-term stability throughout the region. Although the need for the Global Coalition to provide military support, such as airstrikes and other security assistance, might have ended, the following four lines of effort provide a framework for ongoing efforts to contain and mitigate terrorism:

- counter-threat finance to identify and stop financing and funds from reaching ISIS
- stabilization assistance to the United Nations–administered programs to stabilize and restore essential services to liberated areas of Iraq
- measures to identify and stop cross-border transit of ISIS fighters
- programs to counter ISIS propaganda and increase resilience among target populations.[88]

The United States, as the original convenor of the Global Coalition, would do well to invest the time and effort needed to transition this effective organization into one that the region itself assumes leadership and responsibility for, with continued backing from its international partners.

Finally, in tandem with this adaptation of the Global Coalition mission and its leadership, the United States could definitively reorient its counterterrorism policy away from short-term military measures to a longer-term approach to countering violent extremism through noncombat means. The principal argument for this evolution is greater effectiveness over time at lower cost. The ingredients for this shift can be

[88] The Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, "Mission," webpage, undated-a.

found in the current U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism, which was published in October 2018,[89] but the paradigm shift proposed here entails the elevation of the last two primary lines of effort: (1) countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment and (2) strengthening the counterterrorism abilities of international partners. These two lines of effort represent the elements of a coordinated approach to effectively counter terrorism in which we have underinvested to date. They align with the four objectives of a refashioned Global Coalition as proposed earlier. The first plank of a new counterterrorism strategy would employ noncombat security cooperation to strengthen the counterterrorism abilities of regional partners and rely on competent international allies to contain, mitigate, and react to terrorist threats in their regions.

The second plank would address the long-term drivers of radicalization and recruitment through targeted stabilization, economic opportunity and education, and disengagement and proven deradicalization programs that emphasize behavioral outcomes.[90] A variety of deradicalization and disengagement programs have been piloted around the world, but a common understanding of what works best under given conditions has yet to be developed. In addition, the role of online media in radicalization forms an important subset of this problem, although counter-propaganda programs are not likely to have lasting effects unless they are combined with a suite of measures that address the needs of unemployed and disaffected youth in many countries.[91] Intelligence and law enforcement measures to monitor threats and provide for homeland security also could continue, but proactive approaches to diminish the recruitment pipeline are needed to achieve strategic success over time. The alternative is a short-term and military approach often referred to as "mowing the grass," which is a recipe for an endless and costly counterterrorism war.

Conclusion

The challenges to U.S. and regional security and stability will not diminish overnight, and many problems will remain deeply intractable. The depth and extent of conflict in the region require a realistic view of what is possible. In the near term, such a view likely entails prioritizing steps to mitigate and contain conflict, particularly in Syria, through reinvigorated diplomacy that is backed by a commitment to retain a well-defined military presence and continued humanitarian assistance to stem suffering

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[89] The White House, *National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., October 2018b.

[90] See Sina Beaghley, Todd C. Helmus, Miriam Matthews, Rajeev Ramchand, David Stebbins, Amanda Kadlec, and Michael A. Brown, *Development and Pilot Test of the RAND Program Evaluation Toolkit for Countering Violent Extremism*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1799-DHS, 2017.

[91] Todd C. Helmus and Kurt Klein, *Assessing Outcomes of Online Campaigns Countering Violent Extremism: A Case Study of the Redirect Method*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2813-GNF, 2018.

and the prospect of destabilizing mass migration. De-escalation could be the immediate focus to stem proxy wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, backed by diplomatic initiatives and other actions to halt escalatory supplies of arms and fighters.

Violent extremism could likewise be seen as a phenomenon that requires a host of nonmilitary remedies rather than a traditional enemy that can be defeated on a battlefield. De-escalation and other mitigation measures can buy time for longer-term nonmilitary approaches to work. Specifically, we propose a suite of measures to counter violent extremism from both Shi‘a and Sunni armed groups, including bolstering legitimate and professional security forces, particularly in Lebanon and Iraq; improving governing structures and practices for more-representative and -effective government and delivery of public services; emphasizing nonmilitary programs to counter the appeal of violent extremism among young and disaffected populations; shoring up humanitarian assistance to alleviate the acute suffering from conflict and displacement; and adapting the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS into nonmilitary efforts to contain, mitigate, and counter violent extremism. The Global Coalition can provide a vital supportive international framework for continued progress by the region.

Likewise, the conflict with Iran will not be resolved quickly. The immediate peril of nuclear proliferation can be mitigated by a return to compliance with the original terms of the JCPOA by both the United States and Iran, which would buy time for all sides to build on the agreement with a “more for more” formula—more assurances of economic relief for Iran and more assurances that the terms of the agreement would be extended and would open the door to discussions about other regional areas of concern. The resumption of nuclear diplomacy could thus include parallel efforts to tackle the threat of missile development and destabilization through nonstate armed actors. A commitment to respecting sovereignty can be a baseline from which to achieve incremental progress, incentivized by an explicit commitment to work for change through peaceful means.

Multilateral dialogues between Arab Gulf monarchies and Iran, as discussed in Chapter Two, can facilitate de-escalation in the maritime arena and in regional conflicts. European allies can play an important role in mediating such dialogues.[92] Indeed, the Europeans have played active roles in fostering regional dialogues over the past decades, including through the Mediterranean dialogue and NATO’s Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. That said, the need for a wider and inclusive regional security forum is apparent given the increase in military escalation across the region in recent years. A regional forum should not be directed against a specific threat in a NATO-like

[92] See, for example, Cinzia Bianco, “Gulf of Difference: How Europe Can Get the Gulf Monarchies to Pursue Peace with Iran,” European Council on Foreign Relations, December 10, 2020.

security structure; collective security historically has not worked in the Middle East, but cooperative security efforts have shown more promise.[93]

Consequently, in parallel with support for efforts to de-escalate tensions between Iran and the Gulf, the United States should work with other global and regional powers to establish a regional multilateral security forum, drawing on such models as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), to further advance regional stability; prevent unwanted conflict; and address other common areas of concern, such as health, migration, climate impacts, and economic development. Indeed, such ideas have been floated for years. The late Italian Foreign Minister Giovanni De Michelis called for establishing a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean in the early 1990's that would stretch from Morocco to Iran.[94] The concept was even included in the Israel-Jordan peace treaty following the multilateral talks that emerged from the Madrid Peace Conference of 1991.[95] More recently, Biden's advisers have proposed similar ideas, and this framework is even mentioned in the Trump peace plan. Russia has called for such an organization in the Persian Gulf, as discussed in Chapter Four, and Iran has proposed its own version, albeit without U.S. involvement.[96] Although gaps remain about who would be at the table and what might be on the agenda, this widespread discussion about the need for a regional security forum creates an opportunity for diplomatic initiatives in this space.

And, as in the case of countering extremist groups, the United States can increase its investments in reform and economic development among regional partners, making them less susceptible to Iranian influence. Iraq is a particularly pivotal state warranting U.S. support. Deflating Iran's influence requires playing a long game. In other words, the goal should be changing the environment in which Iran operates rather than trying to change the Iranian regime itself. Leveraging Iran's vulnerabilities and building a better regional alternative while supporting the Iranian people is more likely to erode the power and influence of Iran over time than engaging in direct confrontation, and at far lower costs for the United States than its current posture.

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[93] For an exploration of regional security forums in the Middle East, see Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Can It Happen Here? Prospects for Regional Security Cooperation in the Middle East," The Century Foundation, January 18, 2018.

[94] Stephen C. Calleya, *Evaluating Euro-Mediterranean Relations*, London: Routledge, 2005; Howard LaFranchi, "Europe, North Africa to Work for Greater Cooperation," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 10, 1990.

[95] See Dalia Dassa Kaye, "Madrid's Forgotten Forum: The Middle East Multilaterals," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1996.

[96] "At U.N., Iran Proposes 'Coalition for Hope' to Pull Gulf Region from 'Edge of Collapse,'" UN News, September 25, 2019.

CHAPTER FOUR

Global Competitors in the Middle East

If the United States were to shift its Middle East policy, it would not do so in a vacuum. It also will have to consider the actions of China and Russia, the two countries that are increasingly active in the region and that recent U.S. strategy documents have designated as America's leading competitors.[1] In this chapter, we explore the activities of China and Russia in the Middle East and what those activities might mean for a new U.S. strategy in the region. We start with an exposition of their interests and policies in the Middle East and conclude with a discussion of the risks their actions could pose for U.S. strategic goals, along with ways in which the United States might better cooperate with them in areas where interests overlap.[2]

Chinese and Russian Interests in the Middle East

As competitors, China and Russia present different challenges—and opportunities—for the United States.[3] China is still a growing power and plays a central economic role in the world. Russia has stagnated economically but is more willing to use military force to disrupt the status quo and has remained internationally engaged across both military and economic dimensions. Russia has focused on the Middle East as a site of competition for centuries. This stems in large part from the proximity of the region to Russia, and maintaining influence and stability in its neighborhood has been a constant goal throughout the history of Imperial Russia, the Soviet Union, and now the Russian Federation. China, in contrast, is relatively new to the Middle East, but the region has risen in importance as China has grown in both economic and political power. The Middle East thus remains an area of high importance to both countries.

China's involvement in the Middle East has increased in recent decades to such an extent that the region has become the most important for China outside the Asia-

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1 The White House, 2017; U.S. Department of Defense, 2018.

2 Indeed, cooperating to expand prosperity in the region is already a U.S. goal. The White House, 2017, p. 49.

3 James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, *Russia is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China is a Peer, Not a Rogue: Different Challenges, Different Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-310-A, 2019.

Pacific.[4] During the Cold War, China was largely absent from the region. During the early years of the People's Republic, most Middle Eastern countries recognized Taiwan (the Republic of China) as the legitimate government of China, and the People's Republic was largely closed off from the world economically. Egypt and Syria established relations with the People's Republic of China in 1956, but the tide began to shift more strongly after China joined the United Nations in 1971 and took Taiwan's place on the United Nations Security Council.[5] Six countries switched recognition in the 1970s, with four more recognizing China through 1990.

Besides the change in status at the United Nations, China's monumental economic reforms, which started in 1978, opened the path toward greater interest and involvement in the Middle East. During the early years of reform and opening, China focused on developed countries as the source of investment and technology and the site of potential export markets. In the 1990s, China expanded its attention to the developing world, driven in part by its isolation from the West following the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, but also by economic imperatives. Its growing industrial base needed raw materials produced by developing countries and its growing export industries needed markets beyond those in the developed world.

Particular drivers of Chinese involvement in the Middle East included its search for recognition as the legitimate government of China and its economic imperatives. Chief among these economic imperatives is China's sourcing of oil from the Middle East. In 2019, China consumed 650.1 million metric tons of oil.[6] China imported 90 percent of this amount, and the MENA region was by far the largest source region. Crude oil and oil products from MENA countries accounted for almost 44 percent of all imports and almost 40 percent of all consumption. Within the region, the largest single suppliers were Saudi Arabia, accounting for 15 percent of imports and 13 percent of consumption, and Iraq, accounting for 9 percent of imports and 8 percent of consumption. A decade earlier, in 2009, imports accounted for only 59 percent of China's oil consumption. In that year, imports from the MENA region accounted for

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[4] Andrew Scobell, Bonny Lin, Howard J. Shatz, Michael Johnson, Larry Hanauer, Michael S. Chase, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Ivan W. Rasmussen, Arthur Chan, Aaron Strong, Eric Warner, and Logan Ma, *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2273-A, 2018.

[5] Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, *China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1229-A, 2016. Israel was the first country in the region to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1950, but the two countries did not establish formal ties until 1992 (Shira Efron, Howard J. Shatz, Arthur Chan, Emily Haskel, Lyle J. Morris, and Andrew Scobell, *The Evolving Israel-China Relationship*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2641-RC, 2019).

[6] One metric ton equals 1,000 kilograms, or approximately 1.1 U.S. tons; one metric ton of oil is equivalent to 7.33 barrels. For data on consumption, imports, and conversion, see BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy*, 69th ed., London, 2020.

44 percent of China's imports (as in 2019), but only 26 percent of its consumption, indicating the rising importance of the region in China's energy use.[7]

There are additional economic drivers. The Middle East plays an important role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), known in China as One Belt One Road, which is an effort to create greater connectivity across Eurasia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa into Europe. The Middle East's location makes it valuable for both land and sea connectivity. The Middle East is also pertinent to China's security; the potential for terrorism and extremism to emanate from the region is one concern.

In contrast to China, Russia has a long history in the Middle East. This is in large part because the region borders what had been Imperial Russia, and Russia's expansion took it into conflict with the main Middle Eastern empires that existed before World War I: the Ottoman Empire, centered in modern-day Turkey, and the Qajar Empire, centered in modern-day Iran. The Soviet Union, the successor to Imperial Russia, reached its peak influence in the region between 1955, when its client-state Czechoslovakia initiated a significant arms deal with the then–relatively new leader of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and 1972 to 1973, when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat expelled Soviet military advisers and announced that Egypt would buy arms from sources other than the Soviet Union.[8] Although Soviet influence in the region declined, it still remained strong, with good relations with Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Syria, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and what was then South Yemen.[9] Echoes of this past are present today—notably, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, and Syria are among the most-active sites of modern Russian regional engagement.

Russia began to reengage strongly in the region in 2005, emerging fully as a major power there with its large-scale intervention in the Syria war in 2015.[10] The intervention in 2015 turned the tide for Syrian president Assad, but it also paid dividends for Russia, allowing Russia to play a great-power role and enabling Russia to show the region that it would be a steadfast ally, presenting a contrast to how many in the region perceived the U.S. handling of the downfall of Mubarak in Egypt.[11] This illustrates one other aspect of Russia's involvement in the Middle East: It seeks a form of regional

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7 BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy June 2010*, 59th ed., London, 2010.

8 Motti Golani, "The Historical Place of the Czech-Egyptian Arms Deal, Fall 1955," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4, October 1995; Roger F. Pajak, "Soviet Arms and Egypt," *Survival*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1975.

9 Central Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Policy Toward the Middle East: A Research Paper*, redacted, Washington, D.C.: Directorate of Intelligence, December 1986, released December 29, 2011.

10 Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019; James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-236-RC, 2017; Becca Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-340-RC, 2019.

11 Close cooperation between the United States and Egypt on security, political, trade, and development issues marked Mubarak's 30-year tenure as Egypt's president and strongman. However, amid the Arab Uprisings and 2011 Egyptian Revolution, President Obama urged Mubarak to step down from power. Subsequently, many leaders in the region began to believe that they could not count on the United States to guarantee their regimes.

stability that involves supporting leaders it believes can best control their populations, especially because, in Russia's view, the region can be a source of radicalization of populations in Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union. In other words, Vladimir Putin's Russia seeks to preserve the region's status quo, including the continued power of authoritarian leadership.

These historical legacies affect current policies. Russia's deep engagement and intervention in the region, exercise of influence, and efforts to prevent spillovers of unrest into its territory are not new. Although China's engagement is relatively new, this engagement is tied to its recent history of economic growth and the efforts of its government to maintain a strong economy for the benefit of the Chinese population.

As of 2020, Russia has a variety of interests in the region. In part, it uses its involvement to rebuild its status as a great power.[12] It seeks economic advantage through trade, investment, arms deals, and the maintenance of stable oil markets. Unlike the United States, Russia maintains friendly relations with all regional countries, pragmatically cooperating with them when it can.

China, too, maintains friendly relations with all of the countries of the region. However, unlike Russia and the United States, it has shown little interest in becoming involved in settling international disputes and little interest in any type of military intervention.

Chinese and Russian Actions in the Middle East

China and Russia fulfill their goals for the region in a variety of ways. But in broad terms, China tilts toward economic exchange and investment, while Russia tilts toward security and arms sales. In this section, we provide more detail about the various activities in which China and Russia engage in the Middle East.

China's Actions in the Middle East

China strives to maintain cordial relations with all countries in the Middle East, but that can be a challenge. Accordingly, it maintains separate efforts that are in line with the region's divisions. Since 2004, the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, complete with a forum execution plan, has constituted a multilateral approach to the Arab world.[13] China also maintains bilateral relations with Arab countries and with Iran, Israel, and Turkey. It has penned a 25-year cooperation pact with Iran and created

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See Peter Hessler, *The Buried: An Archaeology of the Egyptian Revolution*, New York: Penguin Books, 2019; Scott Horsley, "Obama Tells Mubarak It's Time for Transition," *NPR*, February 2, 2011.

12 Sladden et al., 2017; Wasser, 2019.

13 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China-Arab States Cooperation Forum Holds Ninth Ministerial Conference," July 6, 2020.

technology, construction, and investment deals with Israel.[14] Relations with Turkey are not as formalized, although the two countries have common interests regarding economic exchange and the creation of trade corridors, and Turkey views relations with China as a counterbalance to the West and a hedge should the West decline.[15]

In its relations, China voices the themes of stability, cooperation, multilateralism, and global governance. Diplomatically, although China can place itself as a convener, its lower-level security involvement and interest in not getting entangled in intra-regional political disputes limit its regional influence. It has contributed to multilateral efforts in the name of stability, particularly helping move forward the JCPOA, the nuclear agreement between Iran and the five United Nations Security Council permanent members and Germany. China served as an arbiter between the United States and Iran and, because of the trust of Iran's leaders, persuaded Iran of the potential economic benefits and how China could help bring them about.[16]

But China also has paid particular diplomatic attention to Iran's rival, Saudi Arabia, its leading oil supplier in the region. However, most countries in the region receive Chinese diplomatic attention. Beijing designates relations according to different levels, with the levels signifying the depth and stability that China believes is embodied in the relationship.[17] It has established comprehensive strategic partnerships, its second-highest level of relationship, with Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.[18] China views these as the most important regional partners.

At a lower level, China has deemed its relations with Turkey a strategic cooperative relationship and its relations with Israel an innovative cooperative partnership. In the former case, Turkey can serve as an important pathway toward Europe. In the latter case, Israel can serve not only as a source of technology cooperation but also

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[14] On the Iran deal, see Ellie Geranmayeh, "A Pragmatic Partnership: Why China and Iran Try to Collaborate," European Council on Foreign Relations, July 17, 2020. On relations with Israel, see Efron et al., 2019.

[15] Gönül Tol, "The Middle Kingdom and the Middle Corridor: Prospects for China-Turkey Ties," Middle East Institute, May 29, 2020; Aaron Stein, "Erdogan Doesn't Want Nukes, He Wants to Blow up the System," *War on the Rocks*, September 12, 2019.

[16] John W. Garver, "China and Iran: An Emerging Partnership Post-Sanctions," MEI Policy Focus 2016-3, Middle East Institute, February 2016.

[17] As of 2016, from the highest level to the lowest level, these partnerships were termed comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, comprehensive strategic partnership, strategic partnership, comprehensive cooperative partnership, cooperative partnership, and friendly cooperative partnership ("Quick Guide to China's Diplomatic Levels," *South China Morning Post*, January 20, 2016). However, China sometimes veers from these terms and might create other terms as needed.

[18] Degang Sun, "China's Partnership Diplomacy in the Middle East," The Asia Dialogue blog, University of Nottingham, Asia Research Institute, March 24, 2020. Sun categorizes partners in four levels: pivot states, which are strong regional powers that are crucial to China's interests; node states, which serve as a bridge to facilitate cooperation between China and other great powers; key states, which are medium-sized states that can exert influence; and stronghold states, which are small states that are friendly toward China and help a particular Chinese interest.

as a potential bridge to the United States.[19] Finally, China has strategic partnerships, the third-highest level of bilateral cooperation, with Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, and Qatar.

Although China has not necessarily turned this engagement into strong political or security influence in the Middle East, engagement has accompanied strong economic relations. The countries of the Middle East constitute about 5 percent of global GDP, and in 2018, China sent almost 6 percent of its goods exports to the region but received almost 8 percent of its goods imports from the region. China is also an important source and destination from the point of view of the Middle East, receiving 12 percent of the Middle East's exports and sourcing 12 percent of the Middle East's imports (see Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3).

Table 4.1
Great-Power Exports to and Imports from the Middle East, 2018

	Amount ($ billions)		
	China	Russia	United States
Exports to the Middle East	141	44	84
Imports from the Middle East	167	7	94

SOURCES: United Nations, "UN Comtrade Database," webpage, undated; World Bank, "World Development Indicators," data set, updated October 13, 2020b.

NOTE: In some cases, Middle East data exclude West Bank and Gaza trade.

Table 4.2
Middle East Shares of Great-Power Trade, 2018

	Shares of Great-Power Trade (%)		
	China	Russia	United States
Middle East share of great-power exports	5.7	9.7	5.0
Middle East share of great-power imports	7.8	3.1	3.6

SOURCES: United Nations, undated; World Bank, 2020b.

NOTE: In some cases, Middle East data exclude West Bank and Gaza trade.

Table 4.3
Great-Power Shares of Middle East Trade, 2018

	Shares of Middle East Trade (%)		
	China	Russia	United States
Great-power share of Middle East exports	11.8	0.5	6.6
Great-power share of Middle East imports	12.0	3.7	7.2

SOURCES: United Nations, undated; World Bank, 2020b.

NOTE: In some cases, Middle East data exclude West Bank and Gaza trade.

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[19] Degang Sun, 2020.

In large part, the Middle East's exports were energy products. In 2019, China received 40 percent of its oil imports from the Middle East, accounting for 36 percent of China's oil consumption.[20] The Middle East also contributes to China's natural gas consumption, although less so: Imports from MENA countries accounted for 10 percent of all Chinese gas imports in 2019, and only 4 percent of Chinese gas consumption.

As noted earlier, among specific countries, exports of crude oil from Saudi Arabia constituted 13 percent of all Chinese oil consumption. Iraq was the second-leading regional exporter, accounting for 8 percent of all Chinese consumption. The rise in imports from Iraq has been dramatic, from about 194,000 barrels per day in 2010 to 776,000 barrels per day in 2018.[21] But China is not just a destination for Iraqi oil exports. It also has become an investor and a contractor: China National Offshore Oil Corporation, China National Petroleum Corporation, and subsidiaries are involved in about half of Iraq's oil production as operator or junior partner for Iraqi oil fields; Zhenhua Oil Company and the Zhongman Petroleum and Natural Gas Group also are among the Chinese companies working in the sector.[22] China's Sinopec is also involved in the Kurdistan Regional Government's independent oil sector.[23]

Beyond trade in goods, the Middle East is important to China as a pathway on its BRI, and underlying Beijing's broader initiatives in the region is the effort to establish connectivity through ports, communications, other forms of infrastructure, and greater economic relations—often under the Belt and Road label. Although the BRI often is portrayed as an investment effort, it is largely a lending and construction endeavor. China's economic involvement in the Middle East reflects this.

Between 2010 and 2019, the value of China's investments in the Middle East constituted an annual average of only 4.4 percent of its global investments.[24] Leading destinations were, in order of value, Israel, the UAE, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iraq.

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[20] BP, 2020.

[21] Data are for imports of harmonized tariff code 2709, "Petroleum oils and oils obtained from bituminous minerals; crude," drawn from the United Nations Comtrade Database on September 23, 2020 (United Nations, undated). Original data were in liters, converted to barrels at a rate of 1,000 kiloliters equal to 6.2898 barrels (BP, 2020).

[22] Jassem Al-Jabiri, Samya Kullab, and Staff of Iraq Oil Report, "Iraq Aims to Double Majnoon Output in Two Years," *Iraq Oil Report*, January 31, 2018; "Chinese Consortium in Talks Over Nassiriya Deal," *Iraq Oil Report*, July 27, 2017; Samya Kullab, "ZhenHua Expands China's Role in Iraq's Oil Sector," *Iraq Oil Report*, March 13, 2018.

[23] Patrick Osgood and Rawaz Tahir, "Taq Taq Decline Highlights Kurdistan Oil Woes," *Iraq Oil Report*, February 1, 2017.

[24] American Enterprise Institute and The Heritage Foundation, "China Global Investment Tracker," data set, Spring 2020.

In contrast, during the same 2010–2019 period, the Middle East accounted for an annual average of 26 percent of all Chinese construction contracts worldwide. Leading sites were, in order of value, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Iran, Algeria, and Iraq. Saudi Arabia accounted for the most projects (52), followed closely by the UAE (47). Reflecting China's economic interests, energy accounted for the highest value of construction contracts during that period, with an annual average of 37 percent of all construction projects. And reflecting the connectivity theme of the BRI, transport projects accounted for an annual average of 19.3 percent.[25]

Although they are not as high in value, China's more-recent investments in communications infrastructure are notable from the point of view of the United States. In its foundational 2015 document regarding the BRI, China discussed the creation of an "information silk road."[26] Since then, the concept has evolved into the Digital Silk Road and includes the deployment of mobile communications technology, including fifth-generation mobile (5G) networks, e-commerce links, and common technical standards.[27] These technologies and technology issues are at the heart of U.S.-China competition in this arena. The United States has been actively discouraging countries—especially those with which it has security relationships—from using Chinese telecommunications technology, particularly that of leading Chinese technology company Huawei. Despite this, numerous Middle Eastern countries, including Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have chosen to build out their telecommunications infrastructure with Huawei technology.[28]

The Digital Silk Road and information infrastructure go well beyond 5G networks. Within its own borders and around the world, China is building out smart cities. This involves the deployment of various networked technologies, such as sensors and cameras, combined with analytics enabled by artificial intelligence and the data collected. The systems can be used to enhance public safety, traffic flow, and government services, but they also can be used for surveillance and population control, and could result in the collection of large amounts of data that could be misused.[29] All of

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[25] Real estate was second in annual average at 20.3 percent but third in cumulative value. Real estate is a broad sector and could involve a variety of projects.

[26] National Development and Reform Commission, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, March 2015.

[27] John Chipman, "China's Long and Winding Digital Silk Road," International Institute for Strategic Studies blog, January 25, 2019.

[28] Neil Halligan, "Huawei Remains Strong in Middle East Despite U.S. Restrictions," *Arabian Business*, September 19, 2019; Camille Lons, Jonathan Fulton, Degang Sun, and Naser Al-Tamimi, "China's Great Game in the Middle East," European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2019.

[29] Katherine Atha, Jason Callahan, John Chen, Jessica Drun, Ed Francis, Kieran Green, Brian Lafferty, Joe McReynolds, James Mulvenon, Benjamin Rosen, and Emily Walz, *China's Smart Cities Development*, Vienna: SOS International, January 2020.

these dimensions of smart cities could appeal to authoritarian leaders in the region and help make China a more valuable partner. As of late summer 2019, China was involved in at least five smart city projects, all in Iran and the Arab Gulf countries.[30]

The buildout of transportation and communications infrastructure can be viewed as largely economic, but as the smart cities infrastructure and U.S. policy toward 5G suggests, this buildout also has a security component. When it comes to issues that are strictly security-related, however, China's involvement in the region is much lower than its economic involvement, and much lower than the security involvement of Russia or the United States. Although arms transfers to the region amount to a notable share of global Chinese arms transfers, that actual level is quite low relative to all transfers to the region (Table 4.4).

Despite minimal security investments in the region, Beijing does have security-related equities in the Middle East, which it generally promotes and pursues through multilateral efforts, such as the United Nations Security Council. Its main security interests are ensuring the free flow of energy and tamping down terrorism out of concern that violent extremist ideology could find its way back to China. U.S. involvement generally serves China's interest in safeguarding energy flows. Terrorism and violent extremism are different matters. Although China conducted a counterterrorism drill with Saudi Arabia in 2016, it has had little influence on ameliorating those problems in the Middle East.[31] Indeed, Beijing's harsh policies in Xinjiang toward its Uyghur

Table 4.4
Arms Transfers to the Middle East

		2016	2017	2018
Great-power share of all arms transfers to Middle East (%)	China	4.2	1.1	2.0
	Russia	18.5	16.9	23.7
	United States	40.2	50.2	51.9
Great-power arms transfers to Middle East as a share of total great-power arms transfers (%)	China	24.6	10.3	20.0
	Russia	37.2	36.1	42.3
	United States	56.0	53.5	58.0

SOURCE: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," database, March 9, 2020.

NOTES: Levels of arms transfers are recorded in trend indicator values. The trend indicator value is a measure of production costs and is meant to represent the transfer of military resources rather than the sales price of those resources. Data include what SIPRI terms *major weapons*, including aircraft, air defense systems, anti-submarine warfare weapons, armored vehicles, artillery, engines, missiles, sensors, satellites, ships, turrets for selected armored vehicles and ships, and air refueling systems for tanker aircraft.

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[30] Lindsey Ford and Max Hill, *China's Evolving Ties with the Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: Asia Society Policy Institute, August 8, 2019.

[31] "China Holds First Anti-Terrorism Drills with Saudi Arabian Special Forces," *South China Morning Post*, October 27, 2016.

minority might become a *cause célèbre* for Salafi-Jihadis and exacerbate the region's extremism issue. Notably, several governments in the Middle East have endorsed China's measures.[32]

However, the Middle East also has been the site of advances in China's security capabilities. It has conducted evacuations of civilians from danger zones several times: in Lebanon in 2006, Egypt in 2011, Syria in 2011 and 2013, Libya in 2011 and 2014, and Yemen in 2015.[33] The 2011 Libya operation was notable because for the first time, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) air and naval units played a role, although a limited one. The Yemen noncombatant evacuation was a further step up as the first such operation with full PLA involvement.[34] Protection of civilians has become more important as China has globalized. It conducted antipiracy patrols along the East African coast and established its first offshore military base in Djibouti; both East Africa and Djibouti are adjacent to the Middle East and would allow China to project power into the region. It has also conducted naval exercises with Iran.[35]

Iran presents a good illustration of how China's diplomatic, economic, and security interests often merge. Iran had been an important energy supplier to China and likely will be again—once U.S. sanctions are lifted or China decides not to honor the reimposition of U.S. sanctions. Until arms to Iran were embargoed, China was Iran's

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32 In a letter on July 12, 2019, addressed to the president of the United Nations Human Rights Council, representatives of 50 countries and jurisdictions wrote,

> Faced with the grave challenge of terrorism and extremism, China has undertaken a series of counter-terrorism and deradicalization measures in Xinjiang, including setting up vocational education and training centers. Now safety and security has returned to Xinjiang and the fundamental human rights of people of all ethnic groups there are safeguarded. . . . We note with appreciation that human rights are respected and protected in China in the process of counter-terrorism and deradicalization.

Signatories included representatives of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, the Palestinians, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the UAE, and Yemen (United Nations General Assembly, "Letter Dated 12 July 2019 from the Representatives of Algeria, Angola, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Comoros, the Congo, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, the Philippines, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Serbia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tajikistan, Togo, Turkmenistan, Uganda, the United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Yemen, Zambia, Zimbabwe and the State of Palestine to the United Nations Office at Geneva Addressed to the President of the Human Rights Council," Geneva: Human Rights Council, 41st Session, 24 June–12 July 2019, Agenda Item 3, Promotion and Protection of all Human Rights, Civil, Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, including the Right to Development, Document A/HRC/41/G/17, August 9, 2019).

33 Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 19; "Hundreds of Chinese Evacuated from Libya Amid Growing Violence," Australia Network News, August 2, 2014.

34 Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 19.

35 Thomas Erdbrink and Chris Buckley, "China and Iran to Conduct Joint Naval Exercises in the Persian Gulf," *New York Times*, September 21, 2014; "Iran, China Hold Joint Naval Exercise," *Tehran Times*, June 19, 2017; "Iranian and Chinese Destroyers Hold Joint Drill in Persian Gulf," *Jerusalem Post*, June 18, 2017.

most important arms supplier, accounting for more than two-thirds of arms transfers to that country in 2010 and from 2012 to 2015.[36] In addition, Iran gives China an alternate land route to the Middle East and Europe that does not go through Russia and that will be difficult for the United States to block, should tensions rise between the United States and China.

The capstone of this relationship is the reported 25-year partnership deal that surfaced in 2020 that would involve numerous investment and construction projects, and potentially security cooperation and intelligence-sharing.[37] However, the future of the deal also reflects the way China positions itself in the Middle East: The deal might put China in opposition to the United States, but it also could create difficult relations with the Gulf countries and Israel, all of which are important partners, so China is likely to move slowly in implementation.[38]

Russia's Actions in the Middle East

Russia has sought to maintain balance throughout the region and engages with nearly all state actors.[39] Some of its involvement has not been at odds with U.S. policy, such as Russia's support for the JCPOA.[40] Russia's involvement leading up to the agreement comprised a variety of actions, including supporting a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning Iran in 2010 and coordinating closely with the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom despite tensions over Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014. Furthermore, Russia's nuclear negotiator, Sergei Rybakov, creatively solved problems, and Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, made it clear to Iran that Russia stood with the other five powers (China, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States) at key moments.[41] Russia benefited from this as well: Russia has little interest in a nuclear-armed Iran, and the agreement allowed it to expand its ties to that country.[42]

Russia has had a variety of other broader diplomatic initiatives and bilateral engagements with countries in the region. On the multilateral front, Russia launched the Astana Format to discuss the dynamics of the Syria conflict (the city of Astana has since been renamed Nur-Sultan, but the talks have remained as the Astana Format).

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[36] SIPRI, 2020.

[37] Geranmayeh, 2020.

[38] Joshua Robbin Marks, "Questions Arise Over China's Agreement with Iran," The Media Line, July 30, 2020.

[39] Sladden et al., 2017, p. 6.

[40] "Obama Thanks Putin for Role in Iran Deal," Reuters, July 15, 2015.

[41] Indira A. R. Lakshmanan, "'If You Can't Do This Deal . . . Go Back to Tehran.' The Inside Story of the Obama Administration's Iran Diplomacy," *Politico Magazine*, September 25, 2015; Sir Richard Dalton, "The Iran Nuclear Negotiations: One Year On," *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2016.

[42] Anna Borschchevskaya, "Russia's Cooperation on the Iran Deal Is No Favor to Washington," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 7, 2016.

Moscow also has formulated its own Gulf security concept, which it has been publicizing since July 2019 and would include a "single counterterrorism coalition" among stakeholders as its keystone, with the European Union and the United States among the stakeholders.[43] One longer-term goal is to create an Organization for Security and Cooperation in the Persian Gulf, to include the Gulf countries, Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, India, and others, emphasizing the multilateral nature of the proposal.[44] Although they are unlikely to succeed, the Gulf initiatives reflect Russia's efforts to play a role as a great power in the region's diplomatic and security issues.[45]

The payoff for Russia's intervention in Syria and engagement throughout the region can be seen in the following description of the environment underlying President Putin's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2019, his first in more than a decade: "President Vladimir Putin signaled Moscow's growing Middle East clout . . . on his first visit to Saudi Arabia in over a decade, buoyed by Russian military gains in Syria, strong ties with Riyadh's regional rivals and energy cooperation."[46]

In its bilateral diplomatic engagement, Russia has interacted with most countries in the region, but it has paid particular attention to Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Egypt has presented an opportunity for Russia, in part because of the U.S. stance during the Arab Spring uprisings and as a way for Egypt to push back against pressure from the United States regarding democracy and human rights following the coup against president Mohamed Morsi in 2013.[47] One year after President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi pushed out the democratically elected Egyptian President Morsi, Egypt and Russia agreed to a $3 billion arms deal funded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.[48] The relation-

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[43] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Russia's Security Concept for the Gulf Area," July 23, 2019.

[44] Andrei Baklanov, "Security in the Gulf Area: Russia's New Initiative," Valdai Discussion Club, August 6, 2019; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2019.

[45] In October 2020, Russia brought the Gulf Security Concept up for discussion at the United Nations Security Council, where the United States rejected it as not possible until Iran meets its international obligations (Adam Lucente, "U.S. Rejects Russian Proposal at UN on New Gulf Security Mechanism," *Al-Monitor*, October 20, 2020).

[46] Olesya Astakhova, and Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Visit Signals Putin's Growing Middle East Influence," Reuters, October 14, 2019.

[47] Maggie Michael, "Egypt Military Chief Heads to Moscow in Rare Visit," Military.com, February 12, 2014; David Schenker and Eric Trager, *Egypt's Arms Deal with Russia: Potential Strategic Costs*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2218, March 14, 2014; Oleg Svet and Elissa Miller, "The United States Should Prevent an Egyptian Shift to Russia," Middle East Institute, December 18, 2015; Mohamed Maher, "How Russia Challenges the United States' Investment in Egypt," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 11, 2018.

[48] Maher, 2018.

ship has advanced well beyond arms and includes a Russia-Egypt Strategic Partnership Agreement, increased economic ties, and joint military exercises.[49]

Engagement with Turkey stems largely from the Syrian war and accelerated with the formation of the Astana group. However, there are other reasons for the two countries to engage, including historical relations dating back to when they were both imperial powers, and, in more-modern times, trade relations, including shipments of Russian gas to Turkey. Reflecting its efforts to work with all countries, Russia also has engaged extensively with Iran, especially on the Syrian war; with Saudi Arabia on oil markets and trade and investment; and with Israel on a variety of issues.

With this renewed engagement, the Middle East has constituted an important export market for Russia (see Table 4.2 earlier in this chapter). The Middle East constitutes about 5 percent of global GDP. Adjusting for distance and a variety of other factors, bilateral trade is roughly in proportion to GDP. In 2018, Russia sent almost 10 percent of its goods exports to the Middle East but received only 3.1 percent of its imports from the Middle East. Russian exports largely constituted food and manufactured items, including weapons. The imbalance in shares is largely because Russia has little need for the Middle East's primary exports of oil and gas because Russia is a major energy producer.

Quality data are limited regarding investments by Russia in the Middle East and vice versa, but Russia has made an aggressive effort to attract investments from the region and create co-investment funds. Much of this is carried out by the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which was created with $10 billion in 2011 to make equity co-investments, primarily—but not exclusively—in Russia. As of mid-2020, the RDIF had struck co-investment deals with sovereign wealth funds and investors in Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE. Although a variety of deals and funds have been announced, it is not clear exactly how much investment has been realized.

This cooperation has been particularly notable with Saudi Arabia. Russia and Saudi Arabia established an Economic Committee in 2019 to develop trade and investment ties, and just before the committee's first meeting, RDIF established its first overseas office in Saudi Arabia.[50] In addition, Saudi Arabia has co-invested in a joint fund with Russia and China, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE have co-invested with Russia as well.[51]

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[49] Samuel Ramani, "Sochi Summit Highlights Growing Russia-Egypt Ties," Middle East Institute, November 5, 2019.

[50] Russian Direct Investment Fund, "First meeting of Russian-Saudi Economic Committee Will Take Place During the Visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Riyadh," press release, October 14, 2019b; Russian Direct Investment Fund, "RDIF Opens First Overseas Office in Saudi Arabia," press release, October 8, 2019a.

[51] Russian Direct Investment Fund, "RDIF Attracts Saudi Partner to Expand the Russia-China Investment Fund," press release, October 25, 2018; Russian Direct Investment Fund, "RDIF, Mubadala and PIF Strengthen Investment Cooperation in the Infrastructure Sector," press release, October 5, 2017.

Beyond diplomatic and economic actions, Russia has taken a variety of security-related actions in the region. The most important of these has been the Syria intervention in 2015. The intervention not only turned the tide for Assad but also brought Russia additional security and economic benefits. In 2017, Russia gained a 49-year lease over the port of Tartus, where it has a naval base, and subsequently planned to invest $500 million to improve its operations and build a new commercial port.[52] It also gained the right to operate Syria's phosphate mine, one of the better deposits of the mineral in the world, among other economic benefits from the intervention.[53] Indeed, the Syrian regime has even incentivized Russian energy companies—especially those with ties to security firms, such as Yevgeny Prigozhin's Evro Polis and the Wagner Group—to reclaim resource infrastructure from Syrian opposition elements in exchange for approximately 25 percent of resource proceeds.[54]

Moreover, although Russia is still heavily involved in Syria, it also started providing military, diplomatic, and financial support to the Libyan National Army in the civil war against the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (which Turkey supports) in Libya.[55] This has included training and equipping the Libyan National Army of General Khalifa Haftar and deploying the Wagner Group's state-linked but private military contractors to Libya in 2018. This might also have economic benefits: Wagner Group personnel have moved into Libya's largest oil field, the Sharara field, and its main oil export port, Es Sider.[56] As of September 2020, however, it was not clear that Russia was monetizing these moves.

Arms transfers are another example of Russian security involvement in the region. Russian arms transfers total about 20 percent of all arms transfers to the Middle East (see Table 4.4). These Middle East transfers constitute about 40 percent of all Russian arms transfers, meaning that the Middle East is an important customer for Russia's military industries. Notably, this share had been 33 percent in 2010 and 25 percent in 2011, but then stayed below 20 percent through 2016 as arms sales to Syria dried up.

As of the late 2010s, Russia's biggest customers were Algeria and Egypt. Algeria has been a longtime, steady customer, and regularly receives more than 80 percent of its arms transfers from Russia, but Egypt has reemerged as a major buyer. Sales were

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52 Henry Foy, "Russia to Invest $500m in Syrian Port of Tartus," *Financial Times*, December 17, 2019.

53 Chloe Cornish, Asser Khattab, and Henry Foy, "Moscow Collects Its Spoils of War in Assad's Syria," *Financial Times*, September 1, 2019.

54 Christopher Spearin, "NATO, Russia and Private Military and Security Companies: Looking into The Dark Reflection," *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 163, No. 3, August 8, 2018, p. 67.

55 Brian Katz and Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr., "Moscow's Next Front: Russia's Expanding Military Footprint in Libya," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2020.

56 Benoit Faucon and Jared Malsin, "Russian Oil Grab in Libya Fuels U.S.-Kremlin Tensions in Mideast," *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 2020; "Libya Oil Company: Russian Mercenaries Enter Major Oil Field," *Voice of America News*, July 26, 2020; U.S. Department of Defense, "Russia, Wagner Group Continue Military Involvement in Libya," U.S. Africa Command news release, July 24, 2020.

low in the first decade of the 2000s, increased in 2010 and 2011, fell again, but then rose dramatically in 2017 and 2018. In those latter two years, transfers to Egypt constituted 51.2 percent and 29.5 percent, respectively, of all Russian arms transfers to the Middle East. And in those two years, arms transfers from Russia amounted to almost half of all arms transfers to Egypt, well above transfers from longtime arms seller the United States.

China and Russia in a Reimagined U.S. Middle East Policy

Despite a variety of inroads by China and Russia, the United States is still the dominant power in the Middle East. It is the security guarantor for Israel and the Arab Gulf countries, it has high levels of trade with the region, it is a NATO treaty ally with Turkey, and it has designated seven countries in the region as major non-NATO allies, among many other regional connections.[57] It is also able to broker interstate agreements, as exemplified by the recent signing of the Abraham Accords, the normalization agreements between Israel and Bahrain and Israel and the UAE.[58] These were followed by U.S.-brokered agreements between Israel and Sudan and Israel and Morocco.[59] Were it not for its adversarial relationships with Iran and Syria, one could say that the United States maintains good—or at least working—relations with all parties in the region.

That said, Russia and China both have convening power and increasing regional influence. In the case of Russia, the Astana Format has proven a useful venue for Russia, Iran, and Turkey to influence events in Syria. In the case of China, regular meetings of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum result in a work plan, even if the priority has remained China's economic interests rather than riskier political settlements or security issues.[60] Both Russia and China are eroding wider U.S. power in the region. This might, in part, be attributable to countries in the region attempting

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[57] Major non-NATO allies are designated under law and receive several benefits regarding defense trade and security cooperation. Middle Eastern major non-NATO allies are Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Tunisia; ten other countries outside the region are also designated as such allies (U.S. Department of State, "Major Non-NATO Ally Status," fact sheet, January 30, 2020a).

[58] The White House, "The Abraham Accords Declaration," statement, Washington, D.C., September 15, 2020b; The White House, "Abraham Accords: Declaration of Peace, Cooperation, and Constructive Diplomatic and Friendly Relations," statement, Washington, D.C., September 15, 2020c; The White House, "Abraham Accords Peace Agreement: Treaty of Peace, Diplomatic Relations and Full Normalization Between the United Arab Emirates and the State of Israel," statement, Washington, D.C., September 15, 2020d.

[59] The White House, "President Donald J. Trump Brokers a Historic Peace Agreement Between Israel and Sudan," fact sheet, Washington, D.C., October 23, 2020e; The White House, "President Donald J. Trump Has Brokered Peace Between Israel and the Kingdom of Morocco," fact sheet, Washington, D.C., December 11, 2020f.

[60] Guy Burton, "'Negative Peace'? China's Approach to the Middle East," *War on the Rocks*, September 11, 2020.

to play the great powers against each other to drive a better bargain, for example, by diversifying arms purchases. Indeed, regional hedging strategies have expanded among Arab Gulf states in particular since the 2003 Iraq war and in response to rising concerns over Iranian influence. Or it could be because regional countries see clear benefits from cooperating with Russia or China for arms purchases, but also for trade and investment.

Accordingly, if the United States were to shift its policy in the Middle East, it will need to take account of both Russia and China. In some cases, there might be improved opportunities for cooperation. In the shift toward a focus on support for fundamental reforms that create opportunity for better jobs and economic growth, all three powers have an interest in economic activity and job creation. In the area of safeguarding against terrorism and proliferation, all three powers likewise have an interest. In counterproliferation, they have a proven track record: All three were signatories of the JCPOA. In counterterrorism, they all want to safeguard against the leakage of violent extremists from the region, although their methods differ, sometimes dramatically.

Among the goals of a reimagined U.S. policy, only in the desire to foster better governance and accountability might the interests of the United States, China, and Russia conflict. Russia and China make a point of being very public about noninterference in the way the governments of the region act, and Russia has shown through its Syria intervention that it is indifferent to how such governments treat the people of the region—and the long-term consequences of such treatment. Indeed, Russia's actions underscore its interest in preserving authoritarian governance. In the remaining sections, we discuss potential U.S. responses and policies toward China and Russia in the Middle East in the context of an alternative strategy focused less on threats than on opportunities.

Taking Account of China and Russia in the Middle East

In assessing how the United States can accomplish new policies in the Middle East, it is important to recognize that both China and Russia have limits to their regional influence. The United States, along with its allies and partners in the West, remains the most inviting market and a strong source of investment and aid. Western products are perceived as high-quality (and are, in fact, high-quality). People in the region might think differently about products from Russia and China. Indeed, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran, one disgruntled Iranian was quoted saying, "We were unhappy with all these crappy Chinese goods everywhere. . . . Now they brought us this crappy virus, too."[61] The West is where young people want to pursue their higher education and where people want to take vacations. This westward look is captured by the 2020 Arab Youth Survey, the most recent of a series that started in

[61] Benoit Faucon, Sune Engel Rasmussen, and Jeremy Page, "Strategic Partnership with China Lies at Root of Iran's Coronavirus Outbreak," *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2020.

2012.[62] Young people ranked the United States first among non–Middle Eastern countries, and second overall, as the country in which they would like to live.[63] They also ranked the United States second for country they would most like their own country to be like.[64] And they considered the United States to be the non-Arab country that had increased its influence on the Arab world the most in the previous five years.[65] However, not all of these perceptions are positive. Among those surveyed in the 2020 Arab Youth Survey, 56 percent saw the United States as more of an ally than an enemy; for Russia, this figure was 71 percent, and for China, it was 73 percent.[66]

Furthermore, for countries that recognize the need for reform and better governance and that genuinely want to achieve those goals, China and Russia offer little help. For those efforts, countries of the Middle East must turn to the West—the United States, its allies and partners, and the multilateral lending institutions that they dominate, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In fact, because such efforts could result in greater prosperity in the region, China and Russia would be unlikely to block assistance leading to economic growth (although they could block specific measures that could harm their ability to engage) and would stand to benefit from growth because their trade relations with a more-prosperous region would grow.

Aid Opportunities

Aid illustrates one of the United States' advantages in the region. The United States is part of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's (OECD's) Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which encourages and tracks aid and holds members to certain standards for providing it. In 2018, the countries of the DAC provided more than $13 billion in bilateral official development assistance to Middle Eastern countries, of which the United States provided 28 percent.[67] The DAC contribution amounted to almost 40 percent of all official donor aid flows to the region that year. Beyond the DAC, other significant contributors of aid to the region included Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and multilateral institutions.

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62 ASDA'A BCW, *A Voice for Change: A White Paper on the Findings of the 12th Annual Arab Youth Survey*, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 2020.

63 The UAE ranked highest, followed by the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany. The United States ranked second or third in every year starting in 2012; 2020 was the first year in which Western countries held four of the top five spots (ASDA'A BCW, 2020, p. 53).

64 The UAE ranked highest by a large margin, followed by the United States, Germany, Canada, and Japan (ASDA'A BCW, 2020, p. 54).

65 Among Arab countries, they considered Saudi Arabia and the UAE to have increased their influence the most. Among non-Arab countries, 46 percent ranked the United States first, followed by 20 percent for Turkey, 16 percent for Russia, and 14 percent for Iran (ASDA'A BCW, 2020, p. 59).

66 ASDA'A BCW, 2020, p. 60.

67 OECD, "Aid (ODA) Disbursements to Countries and Regions [DAC2a]," data set, downloaded October 13, 2020.

Additionally, the United States on its own could have substantial influence on reform efforts. Working with like-minded countries in the DAC and with regional aid-giving partners, it could coordinate strong efforts that are well beyond what Russia or China could do. These efforts could be further magnified if Moscow and Beijing were inclined to cooperate on goals of economic reform and more-professional and -inclusive government.

One challenge is that aid often has conditionality, and Chinese and Russian economic involvement comes with no or few strings regarding form of government, treatment of the population, environmental sustainability, or other policy issues that are important to the United States and its Western allies and partners. One mechanism that would give the United States and its allies an advantage would be to offer something of higher quality than what China or Russia might offer. Examples include the Partnership for Quality Infrastructure that Japan started with the Asian Development Bank in 2015 and the Quality Infrastructure Investment Partnership that Japan started with the World Bank in 2016.[68] The principles underlying quality infrastructure include economic efficiency, safety, environmental and social sustainability, local economic and social contribution, and resilience to natural disasters.[69] This ability to offer something of higher quality extends not only to aid but also to economic exchange more generally.

Reforms to U.S. assistance and the creation of the U.S. Development Finance Corporation have enabled the United States to offer equity financing in addition to more-traditional forms of aid, a change that should help it gain greater ability to support economic growth. The United States and its allies in the European Union also can offer technical assistance for reforms. Iraq serves as one illustrative country: Because of its oil resources, Iraq is rich, at least on paper, but U.S. and multilateral assistance could be provided to help it reform its economy, shed government workers (of which it has an unsustainable number), establish a fund to save oil revenue, and bridge the financing gap as it establishes an improved tax system and shifts from its current economic system to a more productive, private sector–oriented system.

Economic Activity and Trade

In terms of economic activity, the United States and its European allies have another advantage: trade. They are inviting markets for nonresource goods, whereas much of China's imports from the region are resources and Russia is only a modest importer. The United States can expand this opportunity with further trade integration through bilateral and regional free trade agreements.

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[68] Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Finance; and Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (Japan), "Announcement of Partnership for Quality Infrastructure," press release, May 2015; World Bank, "Quality Infrastructure Investment (QII) Partnership," webpage, undated-b.

[69] World Bank Infrastructure Finance, PPPs and Guarantees (IPG) Group, "Quality Infrastructure Investment (QII) Partnership," Singapore Infrastructure Hub briefing, January 2020.

The United States at the end of 2020 already had bilateral trade agreements with five countries in the region: Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman. These agreements expand both trade and investment, benefiting the partner country. The United States could negotiate trade agreements with additional countries, or better yet, negotiate a regional trade agreement linking the countries of the region not just to the United States but to each other. The European Union at the end of 2020 had advanced trade integration with the Mediterranean countries of the Middle East, with association agreements with Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia, and a customs union with Turkey.[70] The promise of the United States and the European Union as export markets can help give them a significant edge over both Russia and China and, more importantly, prove beneficial to the development of the Middle East.

This is not to say that Chinese and Russian economic activities are undesirable. Both can and do provide much-needed trade and other economic activities. In the case of China, these activities include project finance and infrastructure construction. This has sometimes raised the risk of countries becoming overindebted or exposing themselves to Chinese cyber spying and data exfiltration. Instead of attempting to block Chinese construction activity—because it largely brings benefits to the region—the United States can offer technical assistance regarding the evaluation of Chinese and other development projects to ensure that countries are benefiting and conducting economic cooperation on terms that are transparent and as favorable to them as possible.

Mitigating Conflict

Even with new U.S. policies that would place the well-being of the people of the Middle East at the center, there will still be conflict in the region. The biggest challenges stemming from great-power involvement are the conflicts in Syria and Libya, in which Russia is an active participant. China thus far has avoided fueling, supporting, or becoming involved in conflict. To mitigate conflict, the longer-term effort should be to facilitate development and good governance so that drivers of conflict are addressed. Better messaging about the damage Russia is doing might bring better results, or at least bring about more support for U.S. goals and actions.

Dealing with Iran

The biggest potential change to the activities of U.S. great-power rivals in the Middle East would come with a change in U.S. policy toward Iran should the Biden administration succeed in returning to the JCPOA; specifically, the easing of nuclear-related sanctions to allow for increased global trade and investment in the country. Allowing Iran to open could provide much greater room for Chinese influence in the region. This expansion of influence is exemplified by the reported 25-year agreement between Iran and China that we discussed earlier in this chapter, which would cover numerous

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[70] European Commission, "Negotiations and Agreements: Current State of Play," webpage, updated October 12, 2020.

areas of cooperation, including the energy, petrochemical, technology, and military sectors.[71]

However, China is unlikely to let this level of cooperation greatly upset its relations with other countries. The Arab Gulf countries are major oil suppliers, and China likely would maintain its stance of being friendly to all countries in the region.[72] Still, China's agreement with Iran is likely to run up against the interests of the United States. Iran is important to China as an alternative terrestrial trade route to the Middle East and Europe, one that will be difficult for the United States or Russia to block in the event of tensions. Furthermore, greater Chinese involvement in Iranian ports could help it project power in the Middle East, and especially in Middle Eastern oil shipment routes. Finally, China could more-easily establish intelligence and security assets in Iran to be used against global rivals, such as the United States or India.[73]

Short of keeping Iran in a box, it is not clear that the United States can do anything about this. Even if the United States maintains sanctions, China might choose to break them—so far, it has largely honored U.S. sanctions—and then the United States would need to consider action against China, further raising the stakes in a U.S. confrontation with Iran.

These developments also could produce several advantages for the United States, although these should not be overstated. Closer Chinese-Iranian relations might be self-correcting to a degree, raising greater discomfort toward China in Iran. For example, at the time the 25-year agreement was announced, it was reported that Iranians were already disapproving of China because cheaper Chinese imports had hurt local industry and because they associated China with the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were concerns about Chinese economic domination of Iran and the effect of Chinese imports on employment.[74] Greater cooperation between China and Iran and internal Iranian security issues could further alienate the Iranian people from their government.[75] In addition, although China presents an economic lifeline and Iran can benefit from its centrality to the Belt and Road concept, China's interests could swamp Iran's interests in the Middle East by, for example, establishing trade routes that bypass Iran or increasing the economic bargaining power of regional

[71] Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Iran Looks to China as U.S. Sanctions Bite," *Financial Times*, September 6, 2020.

[72] Sheng Zhang, "The 25-Year Agreement Between China and Iran: A Continuation of Previous Policy," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 3, 2020.

[73] Simon Watkins, "China Looks to Build Espionage Hub in Iran Under 25-Year Deal," OilPrice.com, September 7, 2020.

[74] Mohsen Shariatinia and Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: Amid Hope and Fear," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 120, 2019, p. 990.

[75] Kersten Knipp, "Iran Partners with China, as the West Steps Back," DW, August 1, 2020.

countries against Iran.[76] Finally, there are concerns in Iran that China's close relationship with Israel could work against Iran's interests.[77]

However, the likelihood of greater Iranian discomfort with China is low under present circumstances, and is likely to stay low, especially if Iranian and Chinese leaders manage the relationship well. According to a public opinion survey, in August 2019, Iranians viewed China the second-most favorably of six countries and the United Nations, behind only Japan. The United States ranked last.[78] Likewise, a November 2019 survey found that 74 percent of Iranians viewed Iran and China as mostly partners (72 percent viewed Iran and Russia as partners). At the same time, 78 percent saw China as a rival of the United States, and 74 percent saw Russia as a rival of the United States.[79]

There is another aspect to opening the door to greater Chinese involvement with Iran. A new U.S. policy in the Middle East would include not only a positive focus on the well-being of the region's population, but also a more considered stance toward countering violent extremism and ensuring nonproliferation. China likewise views countering violent extremism as a priority, and, regarding nonproliferation, China proved essential to the completion of the JCPOA and has been supportive throughout.[80]

Conclusion: Great Powers as an Adjunct to U.S. Policy

Any change in U.S. Middle East policy will have global implications, particularly in the context of rising great-power competition. China and Russia are heavily involved in the region and offer cooperation with regional states with fewer requirements than does the United States. China and Russia are formidable U.S. competitors, with Russia playing a more significant role in the security arena and China in the economic exchange and investment space. That said, the United States and its Western allies have the potential

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[76] Shariatinia and Azizi, 2019, p. 990.

[77] Fariborz Arghavani Pirsalami, Seyed Javad Salehi, and Hossein Alipour, "Developing Sino-Israeli Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Analyzing Desecuritization Scenarios for Iran," *MGIMO Review of International Relations*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2020. Also see Shira Efron et al., 2019.

[78] Respondents could rate their view of countries as favorably, somewhat favorably, somewhat unfavorably, unfavorably, or do not know or no answer. When we aggregate responses of favorably and somewhat favorably into one category, Japan garnered 70 percent of respondents, China 58 percent, Russia 57 percent, Germany 55 percent, the United Nations 45 percent, France 41 percent, the United Kingdom 24 percent, and the United States 13 percent (Nancy Gallagher, Ebrahim Mohseni, and Clay Ramsay, *Iranian Public Opinion Under "Maximum Pressure:" A Public Opinion Study*, College Park, Md.: Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, October 2019).

[79] Amir Farmanesh, *Iranian Public Opinion Four Decades After the Hostage Crisis: State of Iran Survey Series (Nov 2019 Wave), A Joint IranPoll–Chicago Council on Global Affairs Survey*, Toronto: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, IranPoll, and People Analytics, Inc., February 2020.

[80] Harold Pachios, "Let's Look at China's Role in the Iran Nuclear Deal," *The Hill* blog, August 21, 2015.

to offer a better product: an inviting market for Middle Eastern exports and technical assistance for much-needed economic and governance reforms. China and Russia also face limits in their reach, offering opportunities for the United States to advance its own regional interests. A U.S. strategy that seeks to reduce regional conflict also will provide fewer opportunities for Russian intervention and influence.

Over the longer term, a changed U.S. strategy might reduce great-power competition if the benefits of altered polices favorably affect Russia and China. A region with less conflict, less violent extremism, stronger nonproliferation trends, and greater prosperity will benefit China and Russia as well. With Washington's current mindset focused on great-power competition, there is a risk that seeing the region through this lens could preclude cooperation on areas of common concern, such as nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and economic growth. Moreover, as a major source of global demand for energy, China has an interest in regional security and stable energy prices, whereas the United States and Russia, as major energy producers, have an interest in stable prices that enable long-term investments in exploration and development. To be sure, the three global powers are competing in the Middle East and beyond, and some aspects of both countries' engagement in the region are at odds with U.S. strategic objectives and values. But the Middle East need not be another arena for playing out great-power competition in ways that could further destabilize the region. And competition can be tempered by some key overlapping objectives, providing opportunities for cooperation among the United States, Russia, and China in areas where interests do not conflict.

CHAPTER FIVE

Recalibrating Policy Tools

In this chapter, we discuss the various *means*—or tools—by which the United States can achieve the objectives of enhanced regional stability, reduced conflict, and a more effective approach to containing and mitigating threats. We first provide a taxonomy and description of the various tools the United States uses to advance its interests and strategic objectives in the Middle East. We then make a case for a rebalance from the historically heavy reliance on military means of power to other levers of influence. We then survey the current level and apportionment of U.S. resources devoted to the region; the array of security, economic, diplomatic, and other tools that the U.S. government has at its disposal; and the relevant research regarding the most-effective use of those tools. We conclude by formulating criteria for recalibrating the mix of U.S. investments and incentives to foster regional stability.

U.S. Policy Tools

The U.S. government's toolkit comprises outright assistance granted for multiple economic, governance, and security objectives, along with an array of other incentives for economic growth and development, informational and cultural exchange, and a host of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic tools.

As is reflected in Table 2.6 in Chapter Two concerning U.S. partnerships in the MENA region, U.S. aid to regional actors can generally be broken down into five categorical objectives, as defined by the U.S. Department of State—economic growth (and reform); just and democratic government; peace and security; investing in people; and humanitarian aid. For the purposes of our assessment of U.S. tools to support and engage with MENA countries, we have adjusted those categories by subsuming humanitarian aid under investing in people and adding an additional category—diplomacy. We describe those tools and provide examples of them in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1
Taxonomy of U.S. Tools

Tool	Description	Examples
Economic growth	Aid, bilateral, and multilateral agreements to promote economic development, growth, and reform, and facilitate increased trade and investment	ESDF, MCC, TIFAs
GJD	Aid to support good governance, rule of law, accountability, capacity for service delivery	INCLE programs, Middle East Partnerships Initiative, the NED
Diplomacy	Bilateral and multilateral efforts to end conflicts and promote regional cooperation via standing forums or agreements to advance mutual strategic objectives	Arab-Israeli peace process, Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, GCC ministerial dialogue
Peace and security	Security assistance and cooperation through aid, grants, and defense article transfers	FMF, 10 U.S.C. § 333, IMET
Investing in people	Aid and programming to invest in human capital, provide humanitarian aid, and foster person-to-person exchanges	Humanitarian assistance, human rights, U.S. Agency for Global Media, cultural and educational exchanges

NOTE: ESDF = Economic Support and Development Fund. MCC = Millennium Challenge Corporation. NED = The National Endowment for Democracy. TIFA = trade and investment framework agreement.

In the following sections, we provide more details about these tools, which are at the U.S. government's disposal to foster close partnerships and encourage constructive behavior that is in line with promoting a more stable and prosperous Middle East.[1]

Economic Growth

The United States provides direct economic aid to eight MENA countries. It provides this aid as a means to support development, economic growth, and economic reform in the MENA region. Through this assistance, the U.S. government promotes macroeconomic growth, trade and investment in local economies, developments in the agriculture sector, infrastructure investment and improvement, private-sector competitiveness, environmental safeguards and investment in sustainable industries, and the broad improvement of economic opportunities.[2] U.S. aid can vary from direct budget support (in the case of Jordan, this represents more than half of the aid) to support for structural reforms to increase accountability, private-sector competitiveness, and refugee assistance.

Beyond direct assistance, the United States possesses significant tools to encourage economic growth and investment in MENA countries through bilateral and multilateral agreements, such as free trade accords, bilateral investment treaties, and TIFAs.

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1 Although we adopt the Department of State's taxonomy for U.S. foreign policy tools, we do not restrict these categories to solely Title 22 programs and tools. Rather, we include and discuss nonstate programs—such as DoD's Building Partner Capacity program (10 U.S.C. § 333) and the MCC program.

2 U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification, Foreign Assistance—Supplementary Tables, Fiscal Year 2018*, Washington, D.C., February 2017b, pp. 63–72.

The U.S. government has concluded bilateral investment treaties with Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey.[3] The United States has signed TIFAs with every MENA country (except Israel, Jordan, and Morocco) and has a multilateral TIFA with the GCC.[4] TIFAs can increase trade flows, resolve disputes, help develop institutions and integration in the global economy, and push economies toward liberalization, which can, in turn, pave the way to free trade agreements, which are another economic tool of U.S. commercial diplomacy—along with qualified industrial zones. The United States has signed free trade agreements with five MENA countries—Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman—and has established qualified industrial zones in Egypt and Jordan.[5] The leading U.S. role in international financial institutions provides another mechanism for encouraging needed economic reforms, transparency, and structural governance reforms.

Governing Justly and Democratically

The U.S. Department of State and USAID administer and provide funding to programs promoting just and democratic governance. USAID implements the bulk of U.S. assistance programs. In addition, Department of State–funded initiatives aim to strengthen the rule of law and respect for human rights, promote good governance, bolster inclusive politics and consensus-building, and build civil-society capacity.[6] Department of State programs are led by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and are focused on democracy and governance, international religious freedom, independent civil society and media, internet freedom, and human rights.

The U.S. government also promotes improved governance in the Middle East through such programs as the Middle East Partnership Initiative and USAID's Middle East Regional funds. These programs support participatory democracy, women's and youth empowerment, and quality education. Other good-governance mechanisms include country-specific programs, such as the Near East Regional Democracy fund, which promotes democracy and human rights in Iran and other initiatives.[7]

U.S. funding also supports a variety of other democracy and conflict-resolution programs. NED is a prominent example of U.S. government–funded democracy pro-

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[3] See Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Bilateral Investment Treaties," webpage, undated-a.

[4] Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Trade & Investment Framework Agreements," webpage, undated-c.

[5] Riad al Khouri, *EU and U.S. Free Trade Agreements in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Middle East Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, No. 8, June 2008, p. 4; Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Free Trade Agreements," webpage, undated-b.

[6] U.S. Department of State, 2017b, p. 1.

[7] The Near East Regional Democracy fund specifically supports democracy and human rights promotion in Iran, whereas the Middle East Partnership Initiative supports democracy promotion throughout the wider MENA region. See Sharp, Humud, and Collins, 2020, pp. 14–15; and Miller, Binder, and Keeler, 2020.

motion. It is a congressionally funded but independent agency that promotes inclusive and participatory politics, civil-society capacity-building, labor unions, and independent media across the MENA region. NED provides some 1,600 grants to 90 countries annually through four "core grantees"—the National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, Center for International Private Enterprise, and Solidarity Center—and myriad smaller democracy promotion and civil-society organizations.[8] The United States Institute of Peace is another congressionally supported institute that works with governments and civil societies around the world to build local capacities to prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict.

Diplomacy

The United States has regularly undertaken diplomatic efforts to resolve long-running conflicts and encourage cooperation in the MENA region. Among the most prominent examples is the leading role of the United States in promoting the Arab-Israeli peace process—most recently, the 2020 peace agreements and normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel and Bahrain and Israel. The United States also has actively engaged in multilateral efforts to end the Syrian civil war through the United Nations–sponsored Geneva Process, and U.S. participants played prominent roles in the 2015 Skhirat and 2020 Berlin efforts to resolve the Libyan civil war.[9]

Washington entered into a Strategic Framework Agreement with Baghdad in 2008, which "guides [the U.S.] overall political, economic, cultural, and security ties with Iraq," intends to strengthen U.S.-Iraqi relations with "strong economic, diplomatic, cultural, and security cooperation, and serves as the foundation for a long-term bilateral relationship based on mutual goals."[10] As we noted in Chapter Three, the United States also forged and maintained a global coalition to defeat ISIS through two U.S. administrations.

Peace and Security

The United States uses its military to promote security in the Middle East in two ways—through U.S. military presence on the ground and through security assistance to regional partners. As reflected in Table 5.2, seven countries in the region host at least 2,000 U.S. military personnel. Although thousands of U.S. personnel support the counter-ISIS campaign and other smaller counterterrorism activities, the United

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[8] National Endowment for Democracy, "Middle East and North Africa," webpage, undated. From 2015 to 2019, total NED grants to democracy promotion initiatives in the MENA region amounted to $19.2 million.

[9] James Dobbins, Gabrielle Tarini, Ali Wyne, *The Lost Generation in American Foreign Policy: How American Influence Has Declined, and What Can Be Done About It*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-A232-1, 2020.

[10] U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Iraq, "Our Relationship," webpage, undated.

Table 5.2
2020 U.S. Regional Force Posture in the Middle East

Country	U.S. Forces Deployed
Bahrain	5,000
Egypt	454
Iraq	6,000[a]
Jordan	2,300
Kuwait	13,500
Qatar	10,000
Saudi Arabia	2,000
Turkey	1,700
UAE	5,500
Total	46,454

SOURCE: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020.

NOTES: Troop deployment data are current as of February 2020.

[a] As of November 2020, troop levels in Iraq were approximately 3,000.

States gears much of its force posture in the region to maintaining peaceful relations and promoting stability.

Additionally, the United States provides security assistance through several DoD (10 U.S.C.) and State Department (22 U.S.C.) programs of varying sizes and with different intents.[11] These programs can be broadly binned into two categories—sales and financing programs focused on providing equipment and security cooperation programs focused on building partner capacity.

The first of the categories comprises Department of State–administered FMF—the primary mechanism through which the United States provides military grants to its partners in the region—and DoD-administered FMS—the largest means through which the United States transfers arms to its MENA partners. Unlike through FMF, countries receiving arms through FMS are paying for U.S. defense articles with their national funds rather than U.S. taxpayer dollars. However, the U.S. government serves as an intermediary between the U.S. defense firms and foreign buyers, and Congress must approve the sales. Therefore, FMS still represents a tool through which the United States can affect a partner's security affairs.

The second of the categories comprises such programs as DoD's 10 U.S.C. § 333 security cooperation assistance and the State Department's 22 U.S.C. NADR and INCLE, which focus more on building partner capacity and institutions than prioritizing the transfer of U.S.-manufactured arms to a partner. Although these programs provide equipment to partner forces, they largely tie material assistance to specific stra-

[11] 10 U.S.C. § 333; U.S. Code, Title 22, Chapter 32, Foreign Assistance, Section 2291, Policy, General Authorities, Coordination, Foreign Police Actions, Definitions, and Other Provisions.

tegic objectives, such as enhancing partners' counterterrorism capabilities, land and maritime border security, counternarcotics capabilities, and counter–weapons of mass destruction capacities. Another small-dollar but high-impact program in this category is the State Department's IMET program, which brings future security leaders from key countries to the United States for training and education programs at the National Defense University, senior service colleges, and a host of other schools and training programs.

Investing in People

The U.S. government undertakes an array of programming for what the State Department terms "investing in people," which includes humanitarian aid and person-to-person cultural and educational interactions and such exchanges as the Fulbright scholars and international visitors program.[12] It also includes the multilingual informational services and programming of the U.S. Agency for Global Media. Other informational programs include the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center, which initially was formed to counter violent extremism and later expanded to address disinformation campaigns, and the international community–based Resolve Network.[13] These relatively nascent efforts include ongoing research to identify effective methods and impact measurements, recognizing that radicalization drivers and disinformation campaigns are complex phenomena.

The United States provides bilateral humanitarian aid to various MENA countries through protection, assistance, and solutions; disaster readiness; or refugee assistance. The United States also provides aid for health, education, and sanitation in refugee communities and other critical infrastructure. Bilateral humanitarian assistance has averaged $254.4 million over the past five years, the vast majority of which goes to famine- and conflict-wracked Yemen ($243 million annually). The major U.S. health program is the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which has provided more than $90 billion worldwide since 2003.[14] The United States also provides humanitarian assistance through contributions to multilateral entities, such as the United Nations and World Health Organization.[15]

A prominent example of U.S. investment in development, education, and person-to-person exchanges is the Peace Corps, which works in Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. Peace Corps volunteers work in these states to "to help countries meet their develop-

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[12] U.S. Department of State, "Near East Regional Overview: Foreign Assistance Program Overview," *Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations—Appendix 3, Fiscal Year 2017*, Washington, D.C., February 2016b.

[13] Todd C. Helmus, Erin York, and Peter Chalk, *Promoting Online Voices for Countering Violent Extremism*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-130-OSD, 2013.

[14] Kaiser Family Foundation, "The U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR)," fact sheet, May 27, 2020; U.S. Department of State, "About Us—PEPFAR," webpage, undated-a.

[15] Miller, Binder, and Keeler, 2020.

ment needs by building local capacity, to promote a better understanding of Americans around the world and to bring the world back home by increasing the knowledge of Americans of other cultures."[16]

The Case for Rebalance

The Limits of Military Power

The turmoil in the Middle East and almost two decades of U.S. military intervention have deeply discouraged many regional observers. The costs of nearly two decades of war have been steep, and a growing consensus finds the cost and return on that investment to be unacceptable. The experience has prompted a wider reflection across the political spectrum regarding the uses of military power, and this reflection holds the promise for a profound reset in U.S. foreign policy, not only in the Middle East but also elsewhere in the world.

The militarization of foreign policy has been a concern since President Dwight D. Eisenhower's farewell address in 1961, in which he urged the nation to strike a balance between a strong national defense and diplomacy to address the then-dominant threat of the Soviet Union. The militarization of foreign policy is not a feature of the U.S. military institution; it is a mindset that views the principal goals of policy through the lens of threats. This mindset has led to budgets that are heavily skewed to military means and policymaking that consistently defaults to the use of the military instrument of power, even as other tools in the U.S. government inventory, including the powerful potential of public-private partnerships and support for civilian and private initiatives, are defunded or deprioritized.

As we noted in Chapter One, there is a renewed expression of concern across the political spectrum regarding the overmilitarization of U.S. foreign policy.[17] In addition to the well-established arguments for retrenchment on one hand and the arguments for a restoration of the postwar order (based on the assumption of a unipolar world in which the United States exercises sufficient sway) on the other, there is a third school of thought. This third line of argument recognizes the reality of a multipolar world and constrained U.S. resources but seeks a reinvention of foreign policy to focus collective attention on endemic challenges that transcend regional borders—termed "problems without passports."[18]

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[16] U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Fiscal Year 2021*, Washington, D.C., 2020b, p. 83.

[17] See, for example, essays by Robert M. Gates, "The Overmilitarization of American Foreign Policy: The United States Must Recover the Full Range of Its Power," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 4, July/August 2020; and G. John Ikenberry, "The Next Liberal Order: The Age of Contagion Demands More Internationalism, Not Less," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 4, July/August 2020.

[18] William J. Burns, "The United States Needs a New Foreign Policy," *The Atlantic*, July 14, 2020.

Calls for such a rebalance have come not only from civilians, such as former defense secretary Robert Gates, but also from many in the military. Gen Kenneth "Frank" McKenzie, the commanding general of CENTCOM, which oversees U.S. military operations in the Middle East, told an audience at the United States Institute for Peace,

> Philosophically, I would really like to see us move to a solution set where we're not applying the military element of power as a first choice. We're a very blunt instrument; we're a very effective instrument. But really, particularly in complex problem sets, it's an arithmetic approach to an exponential problem, and there are always downstream effects when you lead with the military. We can do a lot of great things. We can go in there and fix a lot of problems initially, but we're never going to be as effective as the other tools of power working because you've got to get to the root causes of those problems. . . . What we can do is address the symptoms and manifestations of the problem, but the root causes of the problems require a nuanced and far more delicate approach.[19]

However, the Trump administration sought to aggressively slash funding for nonmilitary tools. Each year during its four-year tenure, the Trump administration proposed deep reductions to State Department funding of 20 to 30 percent, but congressional leaders and committee chairs from both parties resisted the deepest cuts.[20] Moreover, nearly one-quarter of senior Foreign Service officers have left the State Department since 2017, including 60 percent of the most-senior career ambassadors.[21]

Drivers of Unrest

The largely unsatisfactory record of the past two decades provides one argument for the United States to reassess and recalibrate the investment in and application of the

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19 Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., keynote address in United States Institute of Peace, 2020.

20 As a result of congressional intercession, USAID appropriations increased from FY 2018 to FY 2019—from $1.62 to $1.67 billion. Bilateral economic assistance also increased during this period—from $24.4 to $24.5 billion. Total Middle East Partnership Initiative funding is down from the Obama years (around $70 million), but Congress has still provided considerably more Middle East Partnership Initiative funding than the Trump administration requested ($50 million versus $14.5 million in FY 2020 and FY 2021).

However, stabilization funding to Syria was suspended and then cut during the counter-ISIS campaign, and the administration proposed closing the U.S. Embassy in Iraq.

21 William J. Burns and Linda Thomas-Greenfield, "The Transformation of Diplomacy: How to Save the State Department," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2020.

Such initiatives as The Future of Diplomacy project at Harvard University's Belfer Center seek to build public knowledge and support for rebuilding institutions, restaffing the lost expertise, and adopting organizational reforms. The Future of Diplomacy Project is a multifaceted initiative that "aims to redefine diplomacy in a modern context through the lens of leading practitioners who are engaging in innovative means of conflict prevention and resolution at the negotiation table and beyond" (Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, "Future of Diplomacy Project," webpage, undated).

instruments of national power in the Middle East. The United States invested heavily in military efforts to defeat and deter threats, and yet the region remains more engulfed in conflict than ever. Although the situation in Iraq has improved, the country's chronic ills threaten its fragile peace. Iran, under pressure, has retaliated militarily in numerous countries and resumed nuclear enrichment. Syria is an unresolved quagmire; Lebanon is beset by multiple crises; Libya has become a hunting ground for regional and outside powers—including some U.S. allies and partners—that are seeking advantage; Yemen is further impoverished by a civil war that has been prolonged and has not been resolved through outside intervention; and Turkey has increasingly inserted itself militarily into numerous countries.

However, perhaps the strongest case for rebalancing U.S. resources and using its toolkit can be found by examining the demographic, economic, and institutional indicators that show the growing needs of the population—and the potential for remedies that come from harnessing that same human resource. Sixty-five percent of the Middle East's population is under the age of 30, and approximately 27.5 percent of those ages 15 to 24 are unemployed—the highest rate in the world (Figure 5.1).[22] Women in the Middle East are underemployed at the highest rate in the world.[23] Unemployment and stagnating economies are key drivers of state fragility and are potential sources of unrest. And, as we discussed in Chapter Two, multiple U.S. partners in the region—such as Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey—rank among the mid-to-highly fragile states, in large part because of the countries' flagging economic situations.

Given their high levels of unemployment, youth in the Middle East unsurprisingly rate jobs, education, reduction of personal debt, and better government among their top priorities.[24] Although the frustrated prospects of youth is only one of the complex factors driving political unrest, violence, and extremism, the failure to meet expectations and harness the potential of the region's youth and women will only worsen the instability that currently wracks so much of the Middle East. [25] Moreover, a U.S. regional approach that skews in favor of military tools and forms of engagement is ill-

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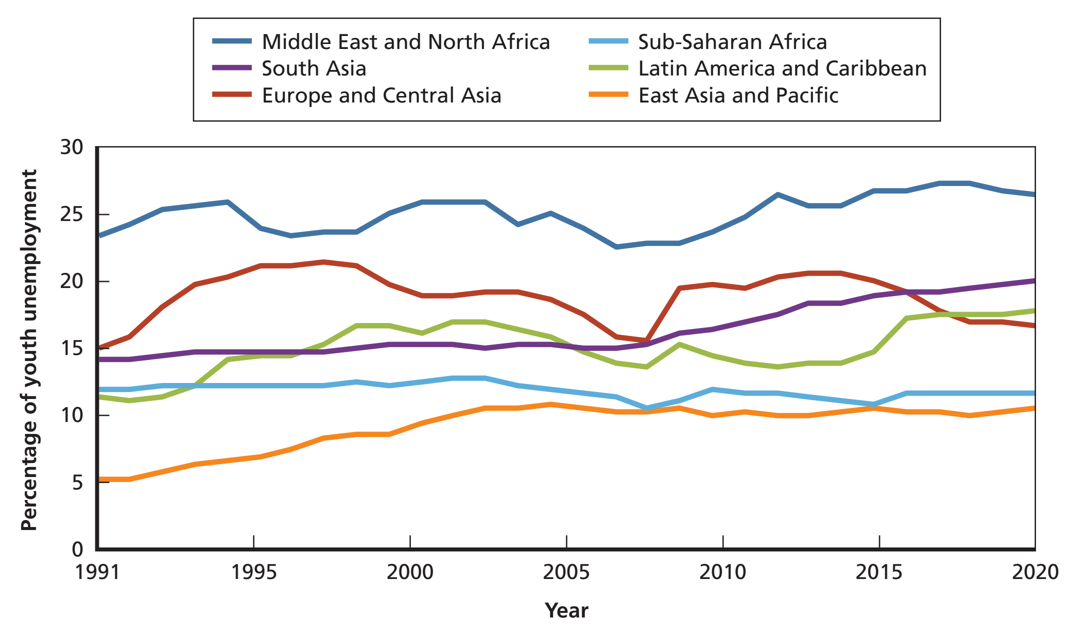
22 World Bank, 2020b; also see ASDA'A-BCW, *A Call for Reform: 11th Annual ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey 2019*, Dubai, United Arab Emirates, 2019.

23 International Labour Organization, "ILOSTAT: The Leading Source of Labour Statistics," database, undated.

24 ASDA'A BCW, 2020; Amaney Jamal, Michael Robbins, and Salma Al-Shami, "Youth in MENA: Findings from the Fifth Wave of the Arab Barometer," Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, presentation, August 12, 2020.

25 Although such countries as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Oman recognize the importance of human capital to economic growth in their national plans, few plans focus specifically on youth. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have prioritized youth in their regional programming, but the move away from statist models of production, subsidies, and other barriers to business has been slow. According to the World Bank's Doing Business Survey, Arab countries on average rank 107 of 190; only the UAE and Bahrain rank in the top 50 (World Bank, "Doing Business: Measuring Business Regulations—Ease of Doing Business Rankings," webpage, undated-a; World Bank, *Doing Business 2020: Comparing Business Regulation in 190 Economies*, Washington, D.C., 2020a).

Figure 5.1
Youth Unemployment by Region



SOURCE: World Development Indicators, data files on unemployment, youth total (percentage of total labor force ages 15–24), by region, 1991–2020 (World Bank, 2020b).

equipped to mitigate the socioeconomic and political drivers of unrest that portend continued—and possibly even exacerbated—instability in the Middle East.

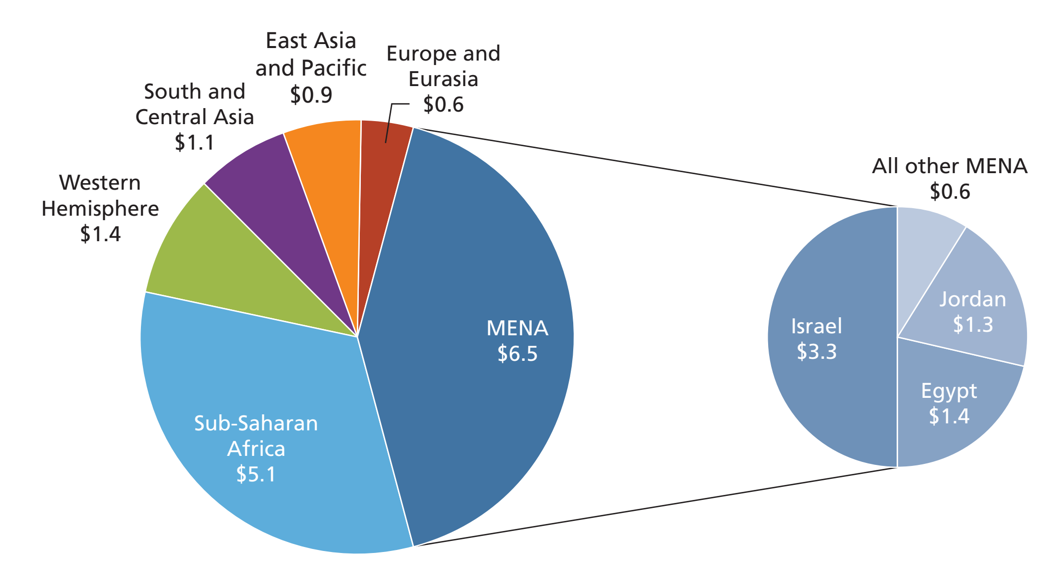
And yet, the Middle East possesses both resources and educated elites to bring about the needed changes. The United States and other international partners can support and incentivize economic and regulatory reform, access to finance, education and soft skills, and employment opportunities through current programs and public-private initiatives. The wealthy Gulf states, given their resources, could lead a regional initiative that would benefit themselves and the entire region by enhancing their domestic policies to diversify their economies and seek new markets. Enacting a vision of creating economic opportunity can transform the region's global reputation as a center of conflict to one that is a source of dynamism that harnesses the energy of its overwhelmingly youthful population. Promoting this change would require a fundamental reset for U.S. policy. As we illustrate in the next section, the United States has not historically made—and is not currently making—these necessary adjustments and investments in the region to account for current realties and needs.

Current Apportionment of U.S. Assistance

As discussed in Chapter Two, the current apportionment of U.S. assistance reflects a legacy decision to support the Arab-Israeli peace accords and the continuing U.S. commitment to Israel. The apportionment also reflects the high cost of recent large-scale U.S. interventions. These costs are reflected in high levels of military assistance and economic support to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, amounting to $6 billion of $6.5 billion in requested bilateral aid to the region (Figure 5.2). Significant funds also have been expended since 2003 in building new Iraqi security forces and supporting stabilization and reconstruction. These large investments represent the great majority of U.S. assistance to the Middle East and account for its large portion of the total share of U.S. foreign and security assistance.

The total values of U.S. economic assistance, FMF, and FMS in the Middle East are listed in Table 5.3, with the primary beneficiaries noted. Although FMS are paid for by the recipient country, congressional and Executive Branch approval is required for the transfer of sensitive military hardware, and numerous laws impose additional restrictions, including 2008 legislation requiring that Israel's military advantage be protected to ensure its security.

Figure 5.2
U.S. Bilateral Assistance to Middle Eastern and North African Countries: Request of Regional Bilateral Aid (FY 2021 $U.S. billions)



SOURCE: Adapted from Sharp, Humud, and Collins, 2020, p. 1.

Table 5.3
Total Average U.S. Economic, Development, Humanitarian, Security, and Military Assistance and Sales, FY 2015–FY 2019

Category	Global Total ($ billions)	U.S. Total to MENA Region ($ billions)	U.S. Total to MENA Region as a Percentage of Global Total
Economic, development, and humanitarian aid	22.62	1.334	5.90
Security assistance and grants	19.49	7.518	38.57
U.S. military goods and services sold	141.40	23.467	16.60

SOURCES: Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance, "World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers," data set, U.S. Department of State, 2019; Miller, Binder, and Keeler, 2020; Security Assistance Monitor, undated.
NOTES: Data reflect the average of FY 2015–FY 2019 totals; only FY 2020 requests (not actuals) were available for some programs and categories at the time of writing. Economic, development, and humanitarian aid totals do not include MCC bilateral assistance. U.S. military goods and services data are drawn from the Department of State's World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers data set and reflect a three-year average, FY 2015–FY 2017, the most-recent data available.

Security Cooperation

All security assistance is not equal, as we noted earlier. FMS and FMF often are unconnected to programs to address specific security threats or build sustainable capacity. Security cooperation, when it is conducted effectively, can be a powerful tool to build professional security forces that are answerable to civilian governments and are capable of addressing security threats to avoid the need for international military intervention. In addition to the CTEF, the U.S. military conducts security cooperation training and support programs with a wide array of Middle East partners through such programs as those under Section 333, as described in Chapter Two. In addition, security cooperation includes a host of training and exercise activities, such as Eager Lion and other annual multilateral exercises.

Security cooperation can be an important tool to promote capable, professional, and interoperable security forces, but it depends on the model applied. Too often, massive security assistance programs do not produce the intended results and yet continue for years, and this underperformance has been especially notable in the case of Arab military forces (with the exception of some elite units).[26] As noted in Chapter Three, studies have demonstrated the importance of building defense institutions to develop and oversee professional forces, not just tactical military capability. In addition, research shows that effective outcomes are more likely when there is an alignment between U.S.

[26] For a comprehensive assessment of 15 Arab armies from World War II to the present, see the seminal work by Kenneth M. Pollack: *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2019a.

and recipient country interests.[27] The United States needs to assess partners' objectives and the legitimacy of their governments. Without doing that, it runs the risk of providing security cooperation that props up authoritarian and abusive governments, thereby undermining rather than fostering long-term security and stability.[28]

RAND research has highlighted that aligning both U.S. and partner objectives and calibrating U.S. efforts to partners' capabilities and absorptive capacity are key to improving the effectiveness of security cooperation. Moreover, by incorporating sustainment and institutional capacity-building components into its security cooperation, the United States can increase the likelihood that its security cooperation efforts will have long-term, sustained impact.[29] Security cooperation can reduce state fragility, and assistance that is focused on education tends to yield effective outcomes, according to RAND research.[30] A balanced regional strategy requires capacity-building and engagement approaches that are not solely or overwhelmingly military in nature. To achieve that balance, consideration should be given to new or increased forms of civilian engagement and capacity-building.[31]

An outcomes-based strategy is also essential. As discussed in Chapter Three, to ensure productive outcomes, security cooperation could be closely monitored and rigorously evaluated, and programs that are not meeting the desired benchmarks could be curtailed or eliminated. In recent years, Congress has directed DoD to place increasing emphasis on improving the implementation of security cooperation programs to ensure that they (1) produce the intended results at reasonable cost and in reasonable time frames and (2) avoid counterproductive effects or risks, such as unintended escalation.[32] RAND research has contributed to the development of assessment, monitoring, and evaluation best practices.[33] To date, however, a rigorous, feasible and uniformly implemented assessment approach is lacking.

Rigorous assessments of outcomes and risks also could be applied to arms financing and sales, inasmuch as the provision of advanced equipment and weaponry can

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[27] The importance of these institution-building and interest-alignment requirements are highlighted in Paul et al., 2015; and Paul et al., 2013.

[28] Michael J. McNerney, Jonah Blank, Becca Wasser, Jeremy Boback, and Alexander Stephenson, *Improving Implementation of the Department of Defense Leahy Law*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1737-OSD, 2017.

[29] Paul et al., 2013, p. xvii.

[30] McNerney et al., 2014.

[31] McNerney et al., 2014.

[32] Public Law 114-328, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, Section 1205, December 23, 2016.

[33] Jefferson P. Marquis, Michael J. McNerney, S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Merrie Archer, Jeremy Boback, and David Stebbins, *Developing an Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation Framework for U.S. Department of Defense Security Cooperation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1611-OSD, 2016.

provoke competition, escalation, or conflict that is destabilizing and costly. Cooperative security arrangements and arms control understandings can reduce these risks and costs and conserve resources that are more productively spent to meet nonmilitary needs. Finally, the Trump administration's invocation of emergency provisions to avoid congressional oversight and approval of FMS could prompt the consideration of revised rules for the abuse of processes intended to ensure full scrutiny of such transactions, which, as discussed in Chapter Two, is critical to avoid arms sales that might increase escalation and that are unnecessary for legitimate defense needs.

Force Posture

In addition to the costs of bilateral assistance, the United States has incurred substantial operational expenditures for its military interventions in Iraq and Syria and, more recently, in (1) deploying new forces to respond to Iran's destabilization; (2) responding to Iran's reaction to U.S. sanctions and other actions; and (3) protecting allies, partners, and its own forces. In recent years, the surges in U.S. deployments have been aimed to counter Iranian influence and intimidation, including attacks on U.S. forces by Iranian-backed militias, which we discussed in Chapter Three. Some of the forces have been temporary deployments of naval forces and ground forces to deter and protect against Iranian threats to maritime traffic and Gulf states.

Precise figures are not available because Pentagon reporting on current deployments has been curtailed. What has been publicized are recent reductions in forces associated with the counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria; forces were reduced from 5,200 to 3,000 personnel in fall 2020. Table 5.2, shown earlier in this chapter, lists current levels of forces in the region. The forces that remain in Iraq and Syria have largely transitioned to noncombat security cooperation activities. News reporting characterized the U.S. force levels in the region as ranging from 45,000 to 65,000 personnel. This number is largely determined by whether a carrier strike group is patrolling in the region's seas and whether a large Marine contingent is afloat.[34] In addition, during the height of tensions with Iran and during Iranian-backed militias' attack on the U.S. Embassy in Iraq in January 2020, elements of the global response force of the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Special Purpose task force were temporarily deployed.

The force totals listed in Table 5.2 result from a combination of policies: an increment to address the escalation in tensions with Iran; the deployment of training and advisory forces to build local capacity to address the ongoing campaign against ISIS; a small counterterrorism footprint; and a steady state force that includes units based in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE. Some of this forward posture is intended

[34] Miriam Berger, "Where U.S. Troops Are in the Middle East and Afghanistan, Visualized," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2020; Eric Schmitt, "U.S. to Reduce Troop Levels in Iraq to 3,000," *New York Times*, September 9, 2020.

as a deterrent force and to reassure allies and partners and provide a means for ready response to crises. U.S. 5th Fleet basing in Bahrain supports maritime security and counterpiracy efforts. Some of this footprint can be reduced as the counter-ISIS campaign winds down (e.g., the Combined Air Operations Center). The fact that CENTCOM headquarters is located in Tampa, Florida, provides a logical rationale for maintaining some forward presence in the region, such as its forward headquarters at Al Udeid in Qatar. However, de-escalation of tensions with Iran, enhanced cooperative security mechanisms, and increased capability and interoperability of partner forces would permit progressive reductions in force levels at Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar.

Changing the Balance from Military to Nonmilitary Tools: A Paradigm Shift

The ability to rebalance from military to nonmilitary tools for achieving security and stability requires adequately funded State Department, USAID, and foreign assistance programs. This will be difficult to achieve in a resource-constrained environment without shifting some funds from military accounts to support the civilian agencies. In addition, the use of DoD security programs under our proposed approach would be tailored to achieve both the short-term conflict-mitigation goals and the long-term regional stability objective.

Overall, U.S. foreign assistance amounts to less than 1.2 percent of the federal budget and 0.18 percent of GDP, which is one of the lowest rates among developed countries.[35] Although the U.S. Congress resisted the deep cuts that the Trump administration sought, which would have further reduced this relatively small portion of the U.S. budget, the relative balance in types of aid shifted further toward military spending. In the FY 2021 budget request for the Middle East, the administration's proposed $5.6 billion in funding skewed heavily to 83.4 percent on security assistance and only 2.9 percent on governance and democracy programs.[36] Assistance to Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia was dramatically reduced and was entirely eliminated for the West Bank and Gaza.

Levels of assistance are important indicators of policy priorities, but it is important to assess the conceptual approach to foreign assistance. In this regard, an important countervailing trend has been developing in the policy community—with significant support in Congress—to refocus U.S. assistance on the longer-term goal of stability and on program effectiveness. Several bipartisan initiatives that have been undertaken in recent years represent a nascent consensus on the need to move away

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[35] James McBride, "Backgrounder: How Does the U.S. Spend Its Foreign Aid?" Council on Foreign Relations, October 1, 2018.

[36] Miller, Binder, and Keeler, 2020, p. 8.

from short-term crisis management and counterterrorism in favor of nonmilitary measures to promote stability and counterextremism. These initiatives are important but not yet enshrined in the overall national security strategy, and the implementation has not been prioritized.

In 2019, the bipartisan Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States reviewed the record of U.S. counterterrorism policy since 9/11 and advocated a shift from crisis response to more-enduring and cost-effective prevention.[37] In response, the U.S. Congress passed the Global Fragility Act (GFA) in 2020 and appropriated $200 million annually over five years to establish a more coordinated approach to preventing instability and extremism, in addition to $30 million annually for five years to establish a Complex Crisis Fund.

The GFA directs the State Department to draft a ten-year strategy and USAID to implement the programming. It directs both to abide by the principles established for more-effective and cost-efficient approaches to stabilization that are framed in the 2018 Stabilization Assistance Review.[38] That policy document, signed by the State Department, USAID, and DoD, adopts a smaller-scale incentive model to replace the overly ambitious and low-performing stabilization and reconstruction programs in the post 9/11 years that totaled $5.9 trillion. The GFA directs the U.S. administration to focus initially on five countries and to address prevention of conflict and stabilization with programs that foster good governance, social cohesion among civilian populations, and resilience against violent extremism.

Both the report issued by the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States and the GFA legislation represent efforts to turn away from short-term military means to attack terrorist groups, safe havens, and the global network of fighters and facilitators that both Al Qaeda and ISIS established. This represents a paradigm shift, and it will require prioritization and effective planning and implementation by the Executive Branch. This congressional initiative represents an opportunity to replace a threat-based approach with one that addresses conditions in the sanctuary countries and the factors that generate and sustain recruits for extremist movements. This proposed shift in approach, almost 20 years after the 9/11 attacks, is based on the realization that hunting terrorists is an endless endeavor that will grow without effectively reducing the inflow to these groups.

This paradigm shift also embraces the need to develop effective approaches rather than simply funneling money into established, steady-state programs. Gaining and

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[37] United States Institute of Peace, *Preventing Extremism in Fragile States: A New Approach—Final Report of the Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States*, Washington, D.C., February 26, 2019. The task force report noted that although the ISIS caliphate had been dismantled and no external attacks on the United States had been successful since 9/11, global terrorism remains a concern because the number of terrorist attacks worldwide had increased fivefold.

[38] U.S. Department of State, *Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas*, Washington, D.C., January 2018a.

retaining public and legislative support for funding will depend on evidence-based monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the programs are achieving the desired impacts. Across the U.S. government, in USAID, the State Department, and DoD, U.S. law increasingly requires that assistance programs conduct the independent and rigorous assessment, monitoring, and evaluation that we discussed earlier in this chapter, although several programs remain exempt from this requirement. The GFA incorporates the emphasis on assessment, monitoring, and evaluation and on coordination with multilateral and private donor programs to create synergy and avoid redundancy.

Such requirements could become universal and could be tied to ongoing funding. This type of conditionality was the central concept behind the MCC, an independent U.S. government organization that was established in 2004. The MCC is a U.S. agency that fosters economic partnerships and growth and employs a distinctive approach, including competitive selection of recipients—which is determined by 20 independent variables, such as a country's freedom of information and respect for civil liberties, and a signed agreement with the recipient country.[39] The recipient countries also must also demonstrate "a commitment to the policies necessary to drive poverty-reducing economic growth."[40] MCC's programs are much smaller than USAID's $41 billion budget, so adopting this more intensive approach to implementing assistance programs would require more time and manpower. However, principles and some practices might feasibly be exported to State Department and USAID programs to improve outcomes. At a minimum, countries should participate in the identification of needs, establish metrics for progress, and commit to regular independent assessments.[41] This approach creates a contract between donor and recipient and thus increases the combined effort to ensure that aid is used productively and for the purposes for which it is intended. It also increases transparency for both donor and recipient countries. Such best practices are increasingly common in both multilateral and other donor countries' programming.

Does foreign assistance actually produce results? Prior research suggests that assistance has, on average, improved social welfare, especially health and education outcomes, along with economic growth and institutional improvement.[42] Evidence suggests that the promise of assistance also has incentivized countries to control corruption, reform fiscal policy, and support business creation, although not demonstrably in the areas of political rights, civil liberties, and accountability, according to one

39 Millennium Challenge Corporation, "About MCC," webpage, undated.

40 U.S. Department of State, 2020b, p. 84.

41 To qualify for MCC assistance, the candidate countries must meet several criteria, including a lower or lower-middle per capita income and demonstrated commitment to democratic governance and equitable economic development.

42 Howard J. Shatz, *U.S. International Economic Strategy in a Turbulent World*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1521-RC, 2016, p. 116.

study.[43] The quest for effective assistance requires continued attention to develop good methods and program design, although at the end of the day, autocratic regimes might value control or pecuniary gain over developmental outcomes. In those cases, direct outreach to civil society or other methods might be warranted. It is also important to carefully determine the amount and type of assistance to be provided, based on rigorous assessments of the absorptive capacity of the specific country and sector.

Conclusion

The resources of the United States are not limitless, and the national security strategies of the Obama and Trump administrations recognized the pressing challenges posed by the rise of China and the adventurism of Putin's Russia to U.S. interests in many parts of the globe. Therefore, it is imperative to establish framing principles that can guide policy decisions regarding how the U.S. toolkit could be applied in the Middle East to greatest effect.

Our analysis identified the following overarching principles:

- First, shift resources from the current heavy investment in military tools to a more balanced approach that prioritizes economic development, governance, diplomacy, and programs focused on people.
- Second, favor long-term rather than short-term considerations in the resource balance and program design, keeping in mind that it is important to reduce the harm caused by conflict and the spread of violence and destabilizing actions.
- Third, monitor, assess, and adapt programs to achieve the desired results. In containment, mitigation, and long-term stability efforts, rigorous methods are needed to increase transparency and accountability. This will help provide greater public support for endeavors that are demonstrably achieving progress.

By applying these basic principles, we arrived at several sector-specific recommendations that will improve both short-term mitigation and long-term conflict-reduction outcomes.

In the **security** realm, the United States could

- design security cooperation programs to build professional, enduring institutions that are answerable to civilian authorities rather than short-term tactical capability and adopt binding evaluation regimens for all programs with concomitant data-collection requirements

[43] Bradley C. Parks and Zachary J. Rice, *Does the "MCC Effect" Exist? Results from the 2012 MCA Stakeholder Survey*, Washington, D.C.: MCA Monitor, Center for Global Development, February 2013.

- prioritize multilateral cooperative security arrangements for maritime security and postconflict stabilization and peacekeeping rather than unilateral measures or bilateral agreements that grant advantage to one country
- reduce the U.S. military footprint in the region and augment U.S. presence with rotational forces for training, exercises, and freedom of navigation patrols as needed to deter and de-escalate tensions
- adopt standards for FMF and FMS to prioritize defensive rather than offensive capability and include nonescalatory use clauses.

In the **economic** realm, we recommend that the United States

- prioritize economic reforms and equitable economic growth that supports the private sector, small entrepreneurs, and employment-generating initiatives
- expand trade and investment agreements and develop a regional free trade initiative
- assist and incentivize economic diversification with technical advice and trade preferences.

In the **diplomatic** sphere, we suggest the following priorities, building on proposals outlined in Chapter Three:

- Restore a nuclear nonproliferation regime with Iran and seek parallel accords on missile development and regional destabilization.
- Develop protocols to ensure that recent normalization accords with Israel promote regional economic growth, development, and increased stability while also seeking to mitigate the risk of violent conflict with Iran or other regional military escalation.
- Support multilateral forums aimed at regional de-escalation, particularly between the Arab Gulf and Iran, and a broader security architecture that is inclusive of all regional states to promote cooperation and confidence-building on a variety of common challenges, including climate change and pandemics.[44]

In the **governance and people** spheres, the United States could

- transition military counterterrorism policy to nonmilitary counterextremism programs
- address humanitarian needs, chronic poverty, and refugees or displaced persons with proven programming and methods

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[44] For further proposals for a regional security and development organization in the Arab Gulf region, see Jeffrey Martini, Becca Wasser, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Daniel Egel, and Cordaye Ogletree, *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1429-RC, 2016, pp. 64–68.

- restore priority to human rights defense, informational programs, and the promotion of democracy
- rationalize governance programs at the State Department and USAID and reduce redundancy, and establish clear assessment, monitoring, and evaluation standards and metrics, possibly by adopting the MCC model of compacts to increase local buy-in and commitment to achieving agreed outcomes.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, we review the central findings from our analysis of key aspects of past and current U.S. engagement in the region and the evolving role of global competitors, such as China and Russia. These findings support our ensuing recommendations for a reimagined U.S. strategy toward the Middle East.

Overall, we find that long-standing U.S. policies in the region have largely fallen short of meeting core U.S. interests and adapting to new regional realities and strategic imperatives. We offer specific policy recommendations for how to advance what we argue would be more-effective and cost-efficient U.S. policies in the Middle East. These recommendations support a strategic shift from a threat-based and military focus to a longer-term approach toward both partners and adversaries that prioritizes investments in diplomacy, economies, youth, and improved governance.

The Case for a Policy Reset

Americans are tiring of the Middle East. Costly wars over the past two decades, economic and social pressures at home, and competing foreign policy priorities have triggered new debates about the wisdom of continued U.S. engagement in this region. Indeed, with an assertive Russia and a rising China, global challenges—such as pandemics and climate change—that directly affect the well-being of Americans, and decreased U.S. dependence on Middle East oil, it might not be surprising that voices across the political spectrum are asking, "Why bother with the Middle East?"

There are several reasons why U.S. engagement remains critical. The conflicts and instability that continue to emanate from this region can directly harm Americans and close allies in Europe and Asia. These conflicts produce negative spillover both regionally and globally by fueling radicalization, violent extremism, arms proliferation, economic volatility, refugee flows, and the export of mercenaries to foreign conflicts.[1] Refugee flows from the region have sparked political crises in Europe and

[1] Turkey's and Russia's use of Syrian mercenaries is an example of dangerous spillover, where continued conflict makes populations—particularly fighting-age men—increasingly desperate and susceptible to foreign actors

dire humanitarian conditions. Despite growing U.S. energy independence, the Middle East remains a major source of global oil (more than half of global proved reserves and 35.5 percent of global production in 2019), and 13 percent of world trade passes through the Suez Canal.[2] In short, Washington cannot wish away Middle East conflicts or pretend that their effects stop at the region's edge.

It is also a failure of vision to write the Middle East off as a "strategic backwater" because of the shortcomings of established policies that have prevented the full realization of the region's promise, including its untapped human capital and economic potential.[3] Comparing the Middle East's GDP output to that of such regions as Asia often neglects to account for population.[4] And greater economic integration in the future could increase the region's GDP and reduce regional unemployment.[5]

That said, the time has come to rethink *how* we engage the Middle East and, perhaps more fundamentally, for what purpose. Our analysis demonstrates why longstanding policies, which have focused on defeating threats and keeping partners on "our side," have fallen short in advancing American interests and helping the region's people. These policies also have failed to adapt to new regional and global conditions. Legacy aid packages and regional partnerships designed during the Cold War era and after the 1990–1991 Gulf War, including massive arms packages to increasingly assertive Arab Gulf partners, are neither advancing regional stability nor responding to populations that are demanding more-accountable governance to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Attempts to defeat adversaries and secure American primacy in the Middle East are not feasible goals in a global and regional landscape with competing powers and other U.S. priorities. A disproportionate focus on the Iranian threat has come at a cost for managing other regional challenges, including continued threats from nonstate extremist groups. And the heavy reliance on military instruments of

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scavenging cheap, politically expedient means of force projection. See Elizabeth Tsurkov, "The Syrian Mercenaries Fighting Foreign Wars for Russia and Turkey," *New York Review*, October 16, 2020.

[2] Hellenic Shipping News, "SCZone Head: 13% of World Trade Passes Through Suez Canal," webpage, June 24, 2019. The Suez Canal also serves as the most important sea line of communication between Europe and Asia (see BP, 2020).

[3] Logan, 2020.

[4] The Middle East constituted approximately 5 percent of the global GDP from 2006 to 2019 compared with that of Asia, which rose from 21 percent to 32 percent by 2019, but the population of the Middle East accounts for 7 percent of the world total, while the population of Asia constitutes approximately 54 percent of the world total. So, on average, Asia is slightly poorer than the Middle East when making such comparisons. These data define Asia as including East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, although there are no GDP data for North Korea for any year and Bhutan is missing GDP data for 2019. Data for the Middle East are missing Syria's GDP starting in 2008 and Iran's GDP for 2018 and 2019 (World Bank, 2020b).

[5] For example, economic integration in the Levant could increase GDP by 3 to 7 percent and reduce regional unemployment by 8 to 18 percent. See Daniel Egel, Andrew Parasiliti, Charles P. Ries, and Dori Walker, *Estimating the Economic Benefits of Levant Integration*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2375-NLI, 2019.

power, a signature feature of U.S. Middle East policy across multiple administrations, is escalating—rather than reducing—regional conflict.

Strategic Adjustments Required by a New Strategy

Given the need to rethink how the United States approaches the Middle East, we consider an alternative framework to guide U.S. strategy to avoid the pitfalls of the past and leverage the opportunities of the future. To most-effectively advance U.S. interests, we suggest shifting the U.S. strategic priority to focus on reducing regional conflict and the drivers of conflict. Our assessment of existing policies indicates that resolving or at least de-escalating current conflicts, preventing the emergence of future conflicts, and improving governance are essential to achieve genuine regional stability. This revised strategic approach includes more focus on addressing the conflicts and socioeconomic challenges that are creating unsustainable pressures on the region's states and immense suffering among its people. In other words, the most-fundamental aspects of a revised regional strategy require *restructuring U.S. relationships to account for the needs of the region's people, not just its leaders, and to reduce U.S. reliance on military tools in favor of economic and diplomatic investments in the region's future.*

Given that most regional leaders are increasingly identifying the need for socioeconomic reforms to educate and prepare their youth for the future, and, in the case of the energy-exporting states, leaders are recognizing the imperative to diversify their economies in preparation for reduced hydrocarbon demand, a U.S. strategy proposing to help with such forward-thinking investments could be welcome. In reality, close U.S. partners might chafe at U.S. policies that increase scrutiny over military commitments and prioritize the de-escalation of regional conflicts. But such conflicts are not serving our partners' interests either; conflicts increase instability and absorb resources that distract from urgent domestic reform agendas. Furthermore, declining oil prices challenge the viability of rentier states, increasing the incentives for regional states to change course.

The United States can harness and strengthen those incentives by making it clear that it will not (1) continue to underwrite the status quo or (2) abandon the region. Instead, American policies can shift to prioritize nonmilitary engagement, require a compact of agreed actions and outcomes for all aid and support, and gain the support of our international allies to encourage and uphold needed change. U.S. force presence in the region need not be driven by preordained agendas of primacy or restraint but instead can be driven by the degree to which force presence demonstrably reduces conflict and increases stability. Such engagement, which would entail a smaller U.S. military footprint but not a complete withdrawal, would signal that the United States is still committed to the region but that force presence alone cannot effectively advance U.S. objectives. A U.S. strategy for the Middle East cannot only be about managing

threats at the tactical level with a narrow focus on force presence, even if a serious debate about appropriate force levels for the region is long overdue.[6]

A strategy requires moving beyond a singular focus on the threat of the day, or what we call *threatism*, to a positive vision for the region. A strategy outlines what end state the United States would like to see emerge—specifically, more growth, opportunity, and accountability. These are also the outcomes the majority of the people in the region, and many leaders, would like to see. The challenge, of course, is how we achieve these mutually beneficial aims, which, of course, will take time. But a new strategic framework can move us in the right direction.

Key Findings

Partnerships

Historically, Washington has largely pursued its regional partnerships based on a binary logic in which the United States cultivates one bloc of states to oppose another. This predominant motivation to keep partners "on our side" to counter the threat of the day has led the United States to prioritize these partnerships as ends in and of themselves, often at significant cost to other regional interests and stability. Because the MENA region is, in the aggregate, the least free of any region in the world, the United States has very few options to enter into partnerships with governments that share American values on political and human rights, which increases the reputational risks for the United States. However, the risks associated with regional relationships—such as entrapment, free-riding, U.S. reputational exposure, and the potential loss of partners because of internal unrest—do not appear to be fully priced into current U.S. partnerships. For example, American assistance in the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which resulted in dire humanitarian conditions and civilian deaths, is one of the more notable illustrations of the costs of regional partnerships.

Moreover, a large share of U.S. assistance to support partnerships is based on legacy thinking about the need to financially support Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Of the just more than $6 billion in U.S. FMF apportioned globally in 2019, 81 percent went to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. Although this formula perhaps made more sense during the period when Egypt and Jordan initially concluded their peace agreements with Israel, this logic appears ill-suited to today's context, when U.S. financial incen-

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[6] One argument for downsizing U.S. force presence suggests economizing by pruning forces within GCC countries by 10,000, where the U.S. military footprint includes vestiges from previous Iraq missions but that are no longer needed for current counterterror and stability objectives. See Bruce Riedel and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "How to Downsize the U.S. Presence in the Middle East," Brookings blog, October 20, 2020. The former commander of CENTCOM, General Joseph Votel, even suggested the possibility of fewer troops in the region if they are offset by increased diplomatic and economic engagement (Gulf International Forum, "Special Conversation with General Joseph Votel: Realities of U.S. Presence in the Gulf," Third Annual Gulf International Conference, video, October 23, 2020).

tives are no longer critical to maintaining relationships that are sustained by these states' own interests in pursuing security cooperation with Israel on common goals, such as counterterrorism.

The Arab Gulf states also enjoy an elevated status in Washington's prioritization of partners through their receipt of U.S. arms sales. Two Arab Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, far outpace all the others combined in arms purchases. An additional concern is that many U.S. partners receiving high levels of U.S. security assistance have not proven to be effective in addressing terrorist threats. The nature of U.S. military sales and financing programs is not well-suited for counterterrorism objectives. For example, most of the foreign military assistance to Egypt has been invested in high-end conventional armaments, such as fighter jets and tanks. The United States also has underprioritized nonsecurity investments. As a region, U.S. nonsecurity investments (for governance, people, economic growth, and humanitarian assistance) comprise just more than one-quarter of the U.S. aid devoted to security assistance.

Adversaries

Constraining state and nonstate adversaries, and, most critically, addressing the underlying drivers of conflict that allow such adversaries to flourish, are critical components of an effective U.S. regional strategy. Regional instability and protracted conflict (1) create a conducive environment for nuclear proliferation, violent extremism, and the rise of transnational terrorist organizations and (2) distract from a positive regional agenda that is centered on growth and accountability. Unfortunately, past and current U.S. policies have fallen short in containing regional adversaries and reducing the drivers of conflict.

Iran is the leading state adversary of the United States in the region, but its power is more limited than conventionally believed. There are several Iranian weaknesses that effective policies could better exploit, including inferior conventional military capabilities, few regional state allies, waning soft power influence, and socioeconomic pressures at home. However, current U.S. policies are not calibrated to match the level and sources of the actual Iranian threat. The manning of U.S. deterrence missions in the Persian Gulf aimed primarily at Iran generally far exceeds that of other U.S. contingency operations in the region. Economic pressure alone—particularly unilateral sanctions—has not proven successful in reining in Iran's nuclear program or its destabilizing regional activity. Hopes that more pressure will lead to capitulation, regime change, or regime collapse have not materialized. The Islamic Republic has proven resilient in the face of deteriorating economic conditions and societal unrest and has effectively and violently suppressed domestic challenges.

Containing the destabilization caused by Shi'a militia groups—which are supported to varying degrees by Iran—requires bolstering legitimate security forces in the areas in which they operate. In addition to U.S. and allied support to the Iraqi army, the professionalization of Iraq's interior ministry, police forces, and border guards is

especially important to counter and displace the militia presence at critical border crossings and sensitive and strategic areas in Sunni-majority provinces.

Two successive U.S. administrations have failed to bring peace to Syria as the Assad regime, with Russian and Iranian support, consolidates control over much of the country. The human cost of the civil war has been extraordinarily high. The war also created a vacuum that allowed ISIS to flourish and contributed to a mass migration outflow to Europe that helped fuel a wave of populist and anti-immigrant electoral victories.

The signature accomplishment of U.S. policy across administrations has been the destruction of the physical ISIS caliphate through a novel, large-scale operation by partner forces in Iraq and Syria. But the enduring defeat of ISIS depends on strong governance and security in the eastern half of Syria to prevent reemergence of an ISIS safe haven. Iraq is struggling to stabilize, improve governance, and resist Iranian interference; its success is critical to the long-term defeat of ISIS and to overall regional stability. As the largest Shi'a Arab majority country, Iraq possesses significant potential to play a critical bridging and stabilizing role because of its location, resources, and educated population.

Although the threat from Sunni extremist groups is diminishing in the region, ISIS and similar groups continue to inspire homegrown terrorism in the United States (and Europe) through online propaganda. For the past two decades, U.S. counterterrorism strategy has unsuccessfully focused on leadership decapitation and network suppression via direct military action and partnered operations. Military means alone have not achieved strategic success, but terrorism can be mitigated by addressing the economic and societal grievances that provide a ready pool of recruits.

Global Competitors

China is relatively new to the region and is largely focused on advancing its interest in economic growth to benefit the Chinese population. Russia has a longer history in the Middle East; it seeks to maintain influence, preserve the status quo, and prevent instability from spilling over from a region in close proximity to it. Russian interests in the Middle East thus tilt toward security and arms sales, while China prioritizes economic exchange and investment, although China's growing technology investments (e.g., 5G) and buildout of smart city infrastructure have security implications. Russia uses its involvement in the region, including military interventions, to rebuild its status as a great power as it seeks economic advantage through trade, investment, arms deals, and stable oil markets. For China, the region plays an important role in its BRI to increase land, sea, and, increasingly, digital connectivity across Eurasia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa into Europe; China also receives 40 percent of its oil imports from the Middle East. Violent extremism and terrorism emanating from the region are a concern for both countries, as is nuclear proliferation.

Despite increasing engagement in the Middle East, both China and Russia face limits. China's interest in expanding investment, construction projects, and potentially security cooperation with Iran are tempered by its need to maintain good relations with Arab Gulf partners and Israel. Russia has been unable to finalize a victory from its 2015 intervention in Syria as the United States and such regional powers as Turkey complicate its ambitions to consolidate Assad's rule and rebuild the country, even if the war brought Russia significant gains. The United States and its Western allies also offer a better product: an inviting market for Middle Eastern exports and technical assistance for much-needed economic and governance reforms. Furthermore, for countries that genuinely recognize the need for reform and better governance, China and Russia offer little help. For those efforts, countries of the Middle East must turn to the West—the United States, its allies and partners, and the multilateral lending institutions that they dominate, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

A shift in U.S. regional strategy could risk increased Russian and Chinese influence as players hedge and expand economic and security ties with these global competitors with fewer strings attached. But the United States maintains advantages in both the security and economic arenas that might reduce such risks, and a revised regional approach might even open up opportunities for cooperation. Russia, China, and the United States all have an interest in the region's economic growth, job creation, nonproliferation, and reduced terrorism. Russia and China would likely resist governance reforms that included conditionality, given their preference for noninterference and status quo leadership, including authoritarian leaders who can control their populations. Indeed, China's expansion of communication technology and its buildout of smart cities in the region has worrying security components, including systems that can be used for surveillance and population control. But over the longer term, a region with less conflict, more prosperity, less violent extremism, and stronger nonproliferation trends will increase China's and Russia's security, providing some opportunities for cooperation when interests overlap.

Policy Tools

U.S. engagement in the region is currently imbalanced. U.S. military assistance to the MENA region has far outpaced economic aid, with the Middle East receiving more than 50 percent of total U.S. military aid globally. The FY 2021 State Department budget request for the Middle East skewed heavily toward military assistance, with 83.4 percent requested for security assistance and only 2.9 percent for governance and democracy programs.

And yet, despite the heavy U.S. investment in military and security assistance, the region remains engulfed in conflict. U.S. force presence remains steady at just under 50,000 forces deployed in the traditional MENA region (which excludes Afghanistan). Force reductions have been modest in scale and are largely associated with the counter-

ISIS fight in Syria and Iraq. The bulk of U.S. forces in the region continues to be deployed for Iran-related contingencies in the Persian Gulf region.

American policymakers have found investing in security cooperation with regional partners to be an attractive way to promote U.S. interests while reducing risks to U.S. personnel; these programs can help promote capable, professional, and interoperable local security forces. But security cooperation that props up authoritarian and abusive governments can undermine rather than foster long-term security and stability. A rigorous, feasible, and uniformly implemented assessment of security cooperation programs is currently lacking.

Policy Recommendations

The resources of the United States are not limitless, but there are more-practical and more–cost-effective ways to stay engaged in the Middle East that would benefit both the United States and the region. Several pillars could guide future policymakers as they adapt to new regional, global, and domestic realities. These guiding principles and recommendations flow from our analysis and findings regarding long-standing U.S. policies that underscore the need to consider a policy reset in the Middle East. The pillars are (1) shifting resources from the current heavy investment in military tools to a more balanced approach that prioritizes economic development, governance, diplomacy, and programs focused on people; (2) favoring a long-term over a short-term time horizon to reduce regional conflict and support growth and development, even at the cost of short-term risks; and (3) working multilaterally with global and regional partners (rather than unilaterally) to address key challenges. Drawing on these overarching principles, we offer specific recommendations for consideration in all key sectors of U.S. engagement with the region that would be necessary to implement a revised regional strategy.

Shifting Resources from Military Investments to a More Balanced Approach

Reduce and Reform U.S. Security Assistance and Presence in the Region

In this area, the United States could

- adopt standards for FMF and FMS to prioritize defensive rather than offensive capabilities and include nonescalatory use clauses. For example, the United States could consider reducing arms sales of high-end weaponry, such as fighter aircraft, to regional partners, particularly in the Arab Gulf, in favor of equipment that is tailored to defensive (e.g., missile defense) and counterterrorism purposes
- review U.S. aid to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan based on partner performance. These states might remain major recipients of U.S. assistance, but the levels and types of aid could be adjusted to meet current regional threats, such as counterterrorism

and missile proliferation, rather than providing legacy aid based on Arab-Israeli animosity that no longer exists at the state level

- close the gap between the Big 3 recipients of aid—Israel, Egypt, and Jordan—and other partners. Closing the gap could entail increasing assistance to what are now second-tier aid recipients—Iraq, Tunisia, and Lebanon—to meet new and emerging security challenges
- design security cooperation programs to build the capacity of professional security forces and enduring institutions that are answerable to civilian authorities rather than focusing on short-term tactical capabilities. For example, the United States could
  - support the development of capable counterterrorism forces and law enforcement that are answerable to civilian government control to reduce reliance on unilateral U.S. counterterrorism
  - retain a noncombat security cooperation program in Iraq as the U.S. and coalition troop presence draws down (to some 3,000 troops) to provide (1) ongoing mentoring to the Iraqi security forces to address weaknesses in policing, logistics, intelligence, and air support and (2) institution-building for civilian defense ministerial functions
  - work with the Iraqi government to disband militias and offer competent personnel opportunities in other services
- shift the policy focus from military counterterrorism efforts to nonmilitary countering violent extremism programs to deter and discourage those who would join terrorist movements and to enable youth to constructively contribute to society. Significant potential exists in Iraq through locally focused stabilization assistance, particularly while ISIS is weak and discredited
- undertake a regional force posture review to assess the costs and benefits of reducing the historically high levels of U.S. military footprint in the region to ensure that troop presence is determined based on current threats and advances regional stability.

Favoring a Long-Term Time Horizon in Support of Human Development, Economic Growth, and Improved Governance

Promote Regional Economic Development and Integration

In this area, the United States could

- prioritize economic reforms and equitable economic growth that support the private sector, small entrepreneurs, and employment-generating initiatives, in conjunction with other bilateral and multilateral donors
- expand bilateral trade and investment agreements and strengthen regional free trade initiatives, starting with subregions, such as the Levant

- build on the recent normalization accords with Israel to promote regional economic growth and development while mitigating the risk of violent conflict with Iran or other regional military escalation that could endanger a prosperity agenda
- increase U.S. support for economic reforms across the Arab world and, in Iraq and Lebanon in particular, use these reforms to help reduce vulnerability to malign influence from Iran or nonstate extremist groups
- support domestic reform efforts that are already underway across the Arab world to diversify economies and train the labor force in preparation for a post-oil future
- require regular evaluation of all assistance programs based on data, drawing on such models as the MCC, which are designed to more effectively distribute U.S. foreign assistance by incentivizing good governance and investment in citizens and that assess aid recipients based on policy performance
- work with like-minded states within the OECD's DAC and regional aid-giving partners (e.g., the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey) to increase aid and promote economic reform
- offset Russian and Chinese advantages in offering aid with little to no conditionality by offering higher-quality assistance that is more likely to sustain jobs and increase productivity over the longer term.

Support Programs That Are Focused on People and Governance

In this area, the United States could

- increase engagement with Middle Eastern publics on such issues as health, youth unemployment, and climate change, including by incentivizing American universities to increase collaborations with regional counterparts
- continue and increase support to civil-society capacity-building efforts in permissive environments to promote the importance of civil engagement and inclusive politics
- permanently remove blanket travel bans on citizens from designated countries in the region, such as Iran
- address humanitarian needs, chronic poverty, and refugees and displaced persons with proven programming and methods. For example, the United States could restore stabilization assistance to Syria and engage Turkey to minimize the prospect of a massive refugee outflow from Idlib
- elevate efforts led by the U.S. State Department to persuade all relevant countries to accept repatriation of the ISIS detainees in Syria. Such steps can forestall the catastrophic scenario of a mass prison break that would allow ISIS to reconstitute
- support regional human rights advocacy by maintaining a spotlight on human rights abuses at the highest levels of government, including applying consistent pressure for the release of political prisoners in such countries as Iran.

Working Multilaterally with Global and Regional Partners

Commit to Regional Multilateral Mechanisms for Diplomacy and Conflict Reduction

In this area, the United States could

- support European or regional mediation to de-escalate tensions between Iran and Arab Gulf states and consider establishing a center for regional diplomacy in Kuwait or Oman that would be a focal point for Arab-Persian and intra-Arab conflict resolution
- launch a diplomatic initiative with the P5 + 2 powers (the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council [i.e., China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States], plus Germany and Japan) to establish an OSCE-like regional security forum in the Middle East. For example,
  - the forum could be kept open to all regional states with an aim to engage in dialogue and confidence-building measures that can help prevent unwanted conflict and address common challenges that cross national borders
  - areas for cooperation could include maritime security, postconflict stabilization, arms proliferation, climate change, water scarcity, health, migration, countering violent extremism, and economic development
  - in parallel with diplomatic efforts to jump-start a regional security dialogue, the United States could revisit initiatives from the early 1990s to establish a supplier forum, starting with the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, to address the control of conventional arms transfers to the Middle East[7]
- continue support for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, which comprises 82 governments and organizations, both from the region and internationally, to secure the enduring defeat of ISIS. The United States could
  - prioritize the efforts of the coalition's four working groups on stabilization, counter-threat finance, counter-propaganda, and cross-border movement to continue combined regional and international pressure against the residual ISIS threat
  - expand the focus on countering violent extremism.

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[7] For an extensive assessment of proposals to limit conventional arms transfers to the Middle East, and one that could be updated in the current regional context (including the lifting of the United Nations arms embargo on Iran), see Congressional Budget Office, *Limiting Conventional Arms Exports to the Middle East*, September 1992.

Avoid Playing Out a Cold War–Like Competition with China or Russia in the Middle East

In this area, the United States could

- avoid efforts to stop Middle East countries from cooperating with China and Russia when such cooperation does not infringe on U.S. interests while leveraging U.S. advantages, such as superior Western economic linkages. For example,
  - Chinese construction activity should not be blocked when it brings benefits to the region; instead, U.S. technical assistance should be offered to evaluate Chinese development projects to ensure that countries are benefiting and conducting economic cooperation on terms that are transparent, are favorable, and minimize the risks of systems being used for surveillance and population control
- compete more effectively in foreign markets, strengthen international norms for trade and investment, and improve U.S. innovation rather than trying to displace Chinese investment in trade and technology in the region. The United States can support infrastructure development that is beneficial to more states than just China through more technical assistance and investment in regional planning efforts
- pursue opportunities for cooperation in areas where Russian and Chinese actions do not conflict with U.S. goals. For example, by building on a common interest in nonproliferation and previous cooperation in such agreements as the JCPOA, the United States can engage both Russia and China in multilateral arms control efforts.

Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments: Toward a New U.S. Strategy in the Middle East

A reconceptualized agenda for the Middle East that is responsive to the need for long-term improvement of the region's prospects will take time and will require difficult choices for policymakers. Some regional partners might not like it. Indeed, the belief in the necessity of assuring friends through arms sales and a permissive attitude toward unwise military interventions are deeply rooted within the Washington establishment and in the region. This mindset often prevented the consideration of fresh policies to advance U.S. interests and regional stability. Urgent threats, such as new terrorist groups or advances in Iran's nuclear program, can become all-consuming for U.S. policymakers, understandably leading to short-term crisis management that distracts from and even eclipses long-term strategic objectives.

However, it is still possible to respond to current and emerging threats and manage them in ways that do not produce counterproductive outcomes for long-term stabil-

ity. There are leaders in the region who understand the need to think about the future differently. The alternative strategy we outline is not about imposing U.S. views about what this region should look like; it is about responding to the real and dire needs coming from the region itself. It is about devising policies that adjust to the regional realities of today to prepare for—and strategically invest in—a better future. It is about leveraging opportunities rather than dismissing this region as a hopeless bastion of endless conflict. It is about building partnerships to work toward a future that prioritizes growth, opportunity, and accountability—in essence, better governance and sustainable economies. We expect that the region's forward-thinking leaders would understand that improved governance is not a burden or challenge to their own survival and influence but a necessity.

Such a strategy would require a shift from a military to a nonmilitary mindset. It would necessitate reducing U.S. military support and arms sales while increasing economic, trade, and financial investments. It would call for more diplomatic initiative to break out of the current cycle of conflict and escalation that has proven costly for the United States and for the region's people. Working toward such a long-term agenda with partners, both regionally and globally, is an investment that could pay far higher dividends, and at far lower costs, than continuing on our present path. U.S. policies to date have largely supported outmoded investments in the past, investments that have contributed to more regional conflict and put Americans in harm's way. Now is the time to reflect on how to break this cycle and strategically invest in a vision for the region that is oriented toward the future.

APPENDIX A

Security-Focused Grants and Sales to Middle East Partners

In Table A.1, we provide information about the security dimension of U.S. engagement with Middle East partners. Snapshots of these data are provided in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 in Chapter Two of the main report.

Table A.1
Security-Focused Grants and Sales to Middle East Partners ($ U.S.)

Country	FMF[a]	FMS Deliveries[b]	ATA[c]	Total NADR[a]	Other Significant Security Funding[a]	Section 1206/333[c]	IMET	INCLE
Algeria	0	500,000,000	250,000	722,000	N/A	0	1,275,400	0
Bahrain	1,000,000	166,666,667	320,000	160,000	N/A	5,830,000	463,200	0
Egypt	1,286,860,000	1,066,666,667	1,500,000	5,000,000	32,500,000[c]	90,865	1,788,000	2,000,000
Iraq	250,000,000	2,866,666,667	6,200,000	43,300,800	902,000,000[d]	1,232	884,000	5,600,400
Israel	3,195,000,000	3,766,666,667	0	0	556,106,000[e]	1,232,800	0	0
Jordan	424,000,000	466,666,667	7,850,000	12,010,000	70,000,000[f]	132,073,026	3,922,000	0
Kuwait	0	800,000,000	0	0	N/A	0	0	0
Lebanon	85,180,000	100,000,000	4,144,000	8,984,000	N/A	111,747,503	2,902,000	10,000,000
Libya (GNA)	0	33,333,333	1,800,000	10,900,000	N/A	0	0	3,040,000
Morocco	8,000,000	200,000,000	320,000	1,420,000	N/A	5,122,062	2,070,000	0
Oman	400,000	366,666,667	2,600,000	1,760,000	N/A	9,801,000	1,766,000	0
Qatar	0	800,000,000	0	0	N/A	0	0	0
Saudi Arabia	0	9,100,000,000	0	0	N/A	0	5,400	0
Tunisia	70,000,000	166,666,667	3,400,000	4,700,000	N/A	28,458,400	2,222,000	12,800,000
Turkey	0	2,833,333,333	0	890,000	N/A	6,974,835	1,774,400	0
UAE	0	5,333,333,333	0	0	N/A	0	0	0

Table A.1—Continued

Country	FMF[a]	FMS Deliveries[b]	ATA[c]	Total NADR[a]	Other Significant Security Funding[a]	Section 1206/333[c]	IMET	INCLE
Yemen (ROYG)	0	0	3,320,000	8,420,000	N/A	28,000	0	500,000

NOTES: ATA = Antiterrorism Assistance Program. N/A = not applicable.

[a] Yearly average over the past five years.

[b] Three-year average compiled from 2015–2017 State Department data, which are the most-recently available data.

[c] Data compiled from the FY 2017–FY 2021 Department of State Foreign Operations Congressional Budget Justifications. The FY 2017 and FY 2020 figures used to calculate the five-year average reflect requests because the actual appropriated amounts were not reported.

[d] Iraq received $4.51 billion in Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF or CTEF-I) support between FY 2016 and FY 2020; $902 million reflects the five-year average.

[e] U.S.-Israel Missile Defense Program; total dollar amount does not exclusively go to Israel but also to the U.S. defense industry for joint development of Arrow III, Iron Dome, and David's Sling. Data are compiled from Jeremy M. Sharp, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33222, November 16, 2020.

[f] Jordan received $150 and $200 million through the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund in FY 2015 and FY 2016, respectively; $70 million reflects that total over a five-year average. Data are compiled from Security Assistance Monitor, undated.

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U.S. policy toward the Middle East has relied heavily on military instruments of power and has focused on regional threats—particularly the Iranian threat—with the goal of keeping partners on "our side." These long-standing policies have largely fallen short of meeting core U.S. interests and adapting to new regional realities and strategic imperatives. RAND researchers offer an alternative framework, suggesting that the U.S. strategic priority must center on reducing regional conflict and the drivers of conflict. This revised strategic approach puts a greater focus on addressing conflict and socioeconomic challenges that are creating unsustainable pressures on the region's states and immense suffering among its people. Researchers analyze how the tools of U.S. policy—political, security, economic, diplomatic, and informational instruments—would need to adjust to more effectively address such challenges in ways that are mindful of limited resources at home. Researchers also examine how the United States deals with both partners and adversaries in and outside the region and consider how to better leverage policies to the benefit of U.S. interests and the region.

The researchers recommend specific actions organized into the following three pillars: (1) shifting resources from the current heavy reliance on military tools to a more balanced approach that prioritizes economic investments, governance, diplomacy, and programs focused on people; (2) favoring a long-term time horizon to reduce regional conflict and support growth and development, even at the cost of short-term risks; and (3) working multilaterally with global and regional partners to address key challenges.

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